SECOND EDITION

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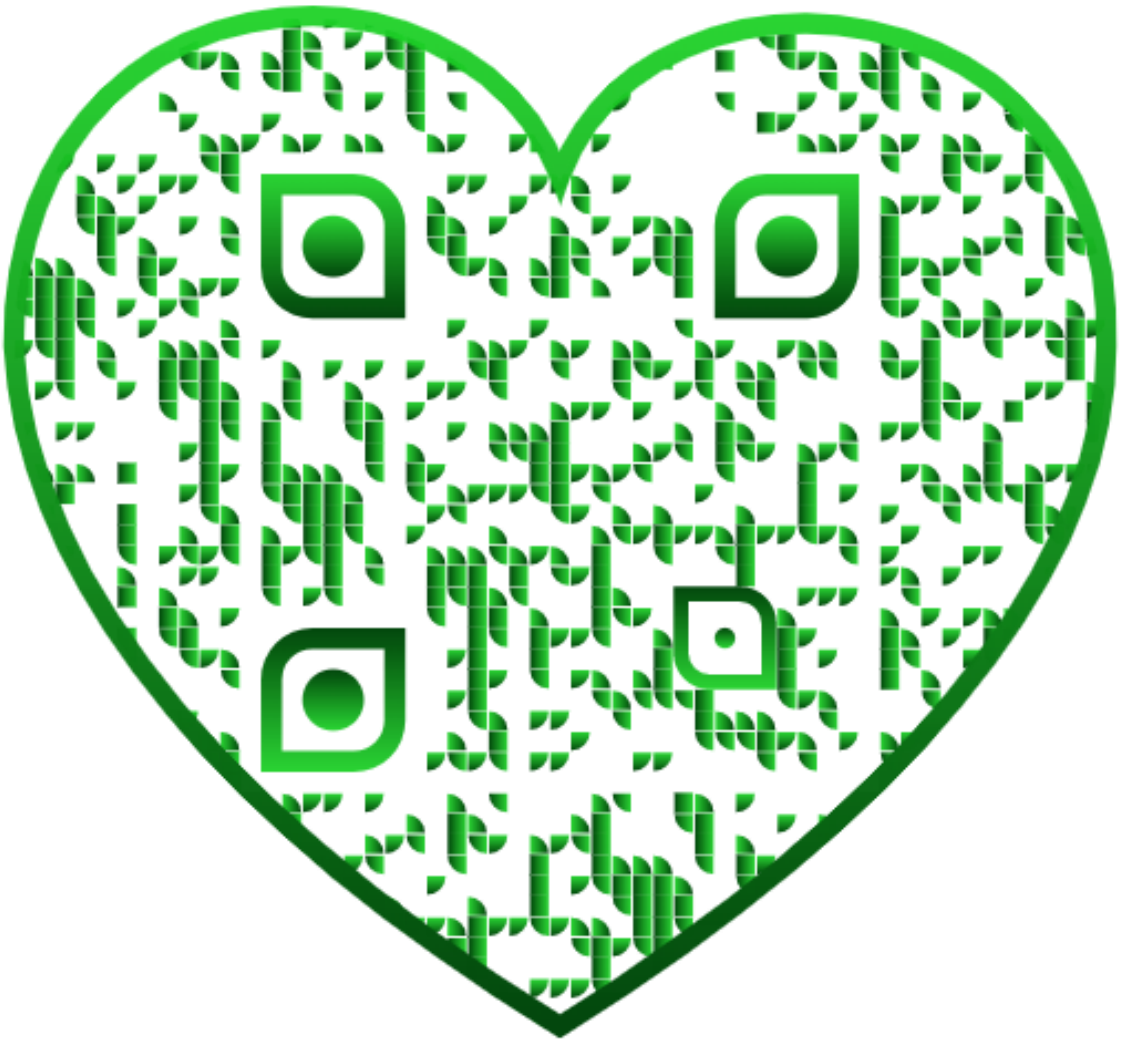
DOUGLAS E. COWAN
AND DAVID G. BROMLEY

Cults and New Religions

A BRIEF HISTORY

WILEY Blackwell



Cults and New Religions

A Brief History

Second Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

We are very gratified by the reception of the first edition of this book. It has become a popular textbook in both Europe and North America for introductory courses on cults and new religions, and has been translated into German, Czech, and Japanese. We hope to see more translations in the future. We have tried to provide a detailed, yet accessible text for both students and instructors, something that will serve as much to inform their research as to spark their interest in further study. New religions continue to appear – some contested, others less so. The issues and questions with which we deal remain central to the study not only of new religious movements, but religion itself. Both of us regularly field media inquiries about this new movement or that. Reporters still want to know, for example, if the Church of Scientology is a "real" religion. Our response to all these inquiries remains the same: there is so much more to new religious movements than you can capture in your newspaper, television report, or blog post.

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History is intended for instructors who have little formal preparation in the field and for students interested in the central questions that have defined new religions study for nearly half a century. We hope that it will encourage a broader and richer understanding of these movements, an appreciation for their diversity and resilience that moves far beyond the stock and superficial descriptions so common in society.

Much has happened since the first edition, some of which we were able to incorporate, much more of which happened so fast that it was simply impossible to include. Sun Myung Moon, for example, the founder of the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity – known colloquially as the Moonies – passed away in 2012. As Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology, taught us, the death of a charismatic leader puts profound pressure on the organization, and we are seeing this in the Unificationist movement now. On the other hand, although we present JZ Knight, also known as Ramtha, as a foil to the notion of the "dangerous cult," in 2014 she was sued by one of her former students because of racist and homophobic comments she made on a video. What we learn from all this is that religion is, for better or worse, a human phenomenon, subject to the foibles and fortes of our shared humanity.

In addition to a thorough updating of the groups included, this edition of *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* included two components we think will be

particularly valuable to students and instructors. First, at the end of each chapter devoted to a particular group or movement we have added a section on research methods, how different scholars have studied and continue to study new religions. Obviously, these are not intended to exhaust the methodological options for study, but to provide a sampling of the ways in which we have sought to understand the continuing emergence and evolution of human religious behavior. Second, in the last chapter we have included a number of text boxes on what we consider groups worth watching. Once again, these hardly describe all the groups out there, but should give students and instructors some guidance in looking for cults and new religions beyond "the usual suspects."

We would like to thank our editors at Wiley Blackwell, particularly Georgina Colby, who has sent gentle reminders when things were due and was unfailingly gracious when we were slightly behind on the rent, as it were. The hundreds of students who have passed through the classes in which many of these ideas were presented have always been a source of pleasure in our academic lives. Our greatest debt, as always, though, is reserved for our spouses, Joie (Cowan) and Donna (Bromley).

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The term cult … is generally understood to have a negative connotation that indicates morally reprehensible practices or beliefs that depart from historic Christianity.

Bob Larson, countercult activist

A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control … designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.

L.J. West and Michael D. Langone, anticult activists

They crouch in dark basements in New York and San Francisco, worshipping the Devil. They wait patiently for the Second Coming or scan the skies for the spaceship that will bring the New Age. A few practice polygamy in isolated mountain communes. Tens of thousands have abandoned their families, friends, educations and careers to follow the teachings of a leader they will never meet.

Melinda Beck and Susan Frakar, journalists

… new religious movements are important indicators of stressful changes in culture and society. They are also interesting attempts to come to terms with rapid social change by imposing new interpretations on it and by experimenting with practical responses. They therefore amount to social and cultural laboratories where experiments in ideas, feelings and social relations are carried out.

James A. Beckford, sociologist

For me, [new religious movements] are beautiful life forms, mysterious and pulsating with charisma. Each "cult" is a mini-culture, a protocivilization. Prophets and heretics generate fantasy worlds that rival those of Philip K. Dick or L. Frank Baum.

Susan Palmer, sociologist

New religions open their members to highly creative lifestyles that enable them to envision themselves as citizens of the global city that our world has become. Like Christian missions, they are global movements that energize their followers with a new vision of the world … By uprooting traditions from their social and historical contexts, new religions propose new ways of life that give members a reason for living and hope for the future.

Irving R. Hexham, historian, and Karla Poewe, anthropologist

Chapter 1

Cults and New Religions: A Primer

It should be clear from the brief sampling on the previous pages that the debate over what constitutes a "cult" or "new religious movement" is often highly contested and emotionally charged. For some, new religions epitomize all that is dangerous and deviant in the compass of religious belief and practice. For others, they represent fascinating glimpses into the way human beings organize their lives to construct religious meaning and give shape to religious experience. Such differences, however, are only exacerbated by the different agendas that motivate various interest groups.

On the one hand, some groups proactively challenge the legitimacy of new religious movements, seeking to convince adherents to abandon their new religious commitments. Exemplified by the first quote opposite, evangelical countercult apologists such as Bob Larson (1989: 19) consider new religions suspect simply because they either deviate or are altogether different from their own understanding of Christianity. Indeed, new religions are often treated with skepticism when their principal beliefs differ from those of the dominant religious tradition in a particular society. As historian of religions J. Gordon Melton points out, though, this dynamic varies considerably from country to country. "For example," he writes, "in the United States the United Methodist Church is one of the dominant religious bodies. In Greece, the government cited it as being a destructive cult" (Melton 2004: 79). Thus, what appears as a cult in one context may be one of the most prevalent religious traditions in another. Secular anticult activism, on the other hand, is motivated not by theological conflict or differences in doctrinal belief, but by civil libertarian concerns for the psychological welfare of new religious adherents. Often informed by an ideology that accuses new

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History, Second Edition. Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley.
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religions of such nefarious practices as "brainwashing" and "thought control," this is illustrated by the second quote opposite (West and Langone 1986: 119–120). For both of these countermovements, however, the same set of salient issues are involved: How do we show that cults are dangerous? How do we warn people against them? And, most importantly, how do we get people to leave them behind? (For detailed histories of the evangelical countercult and secular anticult movements, as well as comparisons between them, see Shupe and Bromley 1980; Cowan 2003a.)

Most people, however, have little direct knowledge of new religious movements. While a relative few may know someone who joined a group colloquially regarded as a "cult," in reality most people get the majority of their information about new or controversial religions through the media. And, though there are occasional exceptions, "cult" has become little more than a convenient, if largely inaccurate and always pejorative, shorthand for a religious group that must be presented as odd or dangerous for the purposes of an emerging news story. Indeed, news media tend to pay attention to new religions only when something drastic has taken place – the mass suicide of Peoples Temple in Guyana in 1978 (Hall 2004); the BATF/FBI siege of the Branch Davidian residence in 1993 (Tabor and Gallagher 1995; Thibodeau 1999); the 1995 and 1997 murder/suicides in Switzerland and Canada of members of the Order of the Solar Temple (Mayer 1999); the 1997 suicides of the Heaven's Gate "Away Team" (Wessinger 2000: 229–252); other preparations for the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it by groups such as the Church Universal and Triumphant (Whitsel 2003); raids by a variety of official agencies on groups such as the Twelve Tribes and the Children of God/The Family (Palmer 1999; Chancellor 2000; Bainbridge 2002); or the 2000 murder/suicides of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in rural Uganda (Mayer 2001). Since media representation of virtually any topic is governed first by the principle of negativity – which, in popular terms, means "if it bleeds, it leads" – the only information people generally have of new religious movements occurs in the context of what sociologist James Beckford calls the "threatening, strange, exploitative, oppressive and provocative" (1994: 143). Because of this, though the vast majority of new religious movements never cross the threshold of a "dramatic dénouement" (Bromley 2002), many are caught up in this kind of negative characterization.

Each of these definitions, however, presents its own set of problems. Arguing, as members of the evangelical countercult often do, that any religious group other than their own is by definition a cult demonstrates little more than the theological hubris by which many exclusivist religious

traditions are marked. Indeed, even in the United States, a number of well-known fundamentalist Christian groups could easily be caught in the net cast by the evangelical countercult's definition. Relying on a variety of "thought control" or "brainwashing" metaphors to explain why people join new religions, the secular anticult often contends that cults display a stereotypical set of negative organizational characteristics and practices. The International Cultic Studies Association – which was formerly known as the American Family Foundation, one of the largest of the secular anticult groups that emerged in the 1970s – has listed 15 characteristics it believes are often found in suspect groups. Among other things, these "cultic groups" have a "polarized us-versus-them mentality"; they use "mind-altering practices (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, and debilitating work routines) to excess"; they are "preoccupied with making money" and "with bringing in new members"; and active "members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities" (Lalich and Langone 2006). Scholars have challenged the usefulness of this kind of checklist on three principal grounds: (i) there is no indication how many of these "characteristics" must be present in order for a group to be considered "cultic"; (ii) it does not adequately define what constitutes "excessive" or "inordinate" devotion, practice, or behavior, nor does it demonstrate that these are by definition harmful; and (iii) it does not satisfactorily discriminate between those very few religious groups which may actually be dangerous and the vast panoply of other religious and social groups that display similar characteristics but pose little or no threat to either their members or society at large. Finally, given that new religious movements are almost always presented in the media through the lens of controversy, two major problems emerge. First, with little or no countervailing information readily available, media reporting comes to represent the cultural stock of knowledge about those groups. However biased and inaccurate, those reports become the foundation for "common knowledge about cults." Second, because a significant part of "what makes an event news is its ability to galvanize public attention quickly and unambiguously" (Cowan and Hadden 2004: 75), the negative portrayals of one new religious movement are often quickly, easily, and once again inaccurately generalized to describe all new religions. What the media represents as the case with one group is very often presented as the case for all.

Conversely, scholars of new religious movements have long countered that many of the groups that are labeled "cults" often closely resemble a variety of conventional organizations in which these same characteristics

are accepted as legitimate or necessary: communes and intentional communities, convents, monasteries, and other high-commitment religious societies, multilevel marketing organizations, and armed forces training and elite combat units, to name just a few (cf. Bromley 1998). This confusion has led members of the secular anticult movement to qualify its usage rather dramatically. Margaret Singer, for example, one of the principal movement intellectuals behind the secular anticult, once wrote: "I have had to point out why the United States Marine Corps is not a cult so many times that I carry a list to lectures and court appearances" (Singer, with Lalich 1995: 98). If this is the case, then it is not so much a problem with the audiences to which Singer spoke, but a fundamental weakness in the anticult definition she employed. More recent statements of the secular anticult movement have acknowledged the weakness of its earlier positions and moved closer to the formulations of scholars of new religions (Giambalvo, Kropveld, and Langone 2013).

Unlike the evangelical countercult, the secular anticult, or the mainstream media, most social scientists and religious studies scholars are interested in understanding new religions in their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Where do they come from? Why do they emerge at particular times and in specific places? How do they develop, and what contributes to their evolution, success, and, not infrequently, their decline? Rather than convince adherents to change their allegiances, these scholars want to understand the processes of recruitment and defection, of experimentation and maturation, and of affiliation and disaffiliation. Why do people join and why do they leave? Are new religious movements, in fact, as dangerous as they are often portrayed in the mass media? When social scientists address these kinds of issues, the important distinction is that their statements are the conclusions rather than the premises of their work.

Over the past few decades and in a variety of ways, social scientists have tried to rehabilitate the term "cult" for scholarly and analytic purposes. These attempts, however, have met with only limited success, and in common usage the word still carries unrelentingly negative connotations. Failing that, a number of alternatives have been suggested. While "new religions" or "new religious movements" (NRMs) have become the most common, others include "alternative religious movements," "emergent religions," "controversial new religions," and "marginal (or peripheral) religious movements." None of these is ideal, either. When has a group been around long enough to stop being considered "new"? To what is it "alternative"? What about groups that are both new and alternative, but

relatively uncontroversial? And what does it mean to be "marginal" – is that merely a function of group size, or does it involve a more distinctive social stigma? While "emergent religions" seems to address some of these issues, many new religions pass largely unnoticed in society, and this begs the question whether they can be said to have really "emerged" at all. There is no perfect answer.

All these differences and questions notwithstanding, though, it is important to remember throughout this book that members of the groups we discuss never consider themselves part of a "cult." A few new religions, such as the Raëlians, will admit to being a "cult," but in doing so they are actively redefining the term to strip it of its negative connotations. While adherents of some groups are content to be regarded as members of a new religion, others, such as practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (TM), contend that theirs is not a religious movement at all. Members of the Church of Scientology, on the other hand, insist that theirs is a bona fide religion, despite widespread media and countermovement criticism that it is not. Still others, such as Unificationists, Branch Davidians, or members of the Children of God/The Family, are clear that their faith is not new at all, that they are in fact devout Christians and full members of the largest single religious group on the planet.

In this book, we take the position that members of new religions want (and ought) to be taken as seriously as any other religious believer. Any preconceived notions that new religious adherents are brainwashed, spiritually deceived, or mentally ill are not only problematic from an empirical standpoint, but erect significant barriers to understanding these fascinating social movements more fully. This is why we believe that recognizing new religions as sincere (if occasionally problematic) attempts to come to terms with what adherents regard as the most important issues in life is a far more productive endeavor than simply dismissing them as theological imposters, attacking them as social deviants, or capitalizing on them only when they appear newsworthy.

The Range of New Religious Movements

However we define new religions or new religious movements, they remain an important if somewhat elusive set of social entities and organizations. As sociologist of religion Lorne Dawson points out, not only are they "intrinsically interesting," their beliefs and practices often "unusual or even fantastic" (2006: 179). More than that, they have the potential to

reveal significant things about the societies in which they emerge, occasionally flourish, and not infrequently decline. More than a generation ago, Christian minister Jan Karel van Baalen called cults "the unpaid bills of the church" (1960: 420). Although he meant this in the most negative possible terms – that new religious movements were appearing as a result of something the Christian church was not doing, or was doing incorrectly – his comment speaks to the larger issue of new religious emergence in late modern society. What kind of societies allow for the appearance of new religions? How does the response of a particular society to new religions in its midst affect the growth and development of those groups? How has the presence of new religious movements changed the shape or direction of a society, and vice versa? These are some of the questions we address in the following chapters.

New religions have appeared throughout history. In one sense, every religious tradition was "new" or "alternative" at some point in time and some place on the globe. For example, there was a time when Christianity did not exist in any form, and when it did emerge as a self-aware social organization, it was treated with much the same fear and skepticism as many new religions today. Moreover, though it had been the dominant social and religious power in Europe for more than a millennium, by the time it was brought to North America by zealous Catholic missionaries, Christianity could hardly have appeared anything but new, alternative, and more than a little dangerous to the indigenous peoples on whom it was eventually forced.

In the United States, new religions have been produced for hundreds of years, and the number of groups we know about continues to expand. According to Melton, there are approximately 2500 different religious groups in the United States, about half of those what he terms "non-conventional" (1998a: 9). Further, the number of new groups is now growing by about two hundred each decade. Among other things, this makes the United States one of the most religiously diverse countries both in the world and throughout history. The vast majority of these "nonconventional" groups are very small, and most pass with little or no notice in society. A few, however, have generated controversy in ways that far exceed their relatively small size.

Although alternative, sectarian religious movements such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Jehovah's Witnesses, and a variety of Spiritualist and New Thought movements have been around in the United States since the nineteenth century, 1965 marked the advent of exceptional growth in new religions. One of the most common

explanations for the emergence of this broad array of NRMs in the 1960s and 1970s was the social and cultural ferment characterized by countercultural rebellion among young people, the civil rights movement and the deep wounds in American society it revealed, the Vietnam War and popular opposition to it, and the Watergate scandal and the weakening of public confidence in the government it provoked. In this view of events, the period was characterized by a profound crisis of meaning and identity, and new religions became the conveyors of alternative meaning structures and new identities. In this, they are popular successors to the countercultural movements of the 1960s (Glock and Bellah 1976). With the relaxation in 1965 of American statutes limiting immigration from a number of Asian countries, this growth was particularly true of groups claiming some kind of Eastern religious origin. As people looked away from their various Western heritages, many "turned East" (Cox 1977), hoping for a more meaningful religious experience.

Contrary to the rather simplistic and reductionist ways in which they are often presented by the evangelical countercult, the secular anticult, and the media, new religions are extraordinarily diverse, theologically, behaviorally, and sociologically complex, and most either emerge or are formed from a broad range of source traditions. Some, such as the Unification Church, the Branch Davidians, and the Children of God/The Family have set themselves apart from their parent tradition – in this case Christianity – by virtue of their particular sectarian teachings and practices. Other NRMs are not "religious" in what we might loosely call a traditional sense. The Church of Scientology, for example, combines contemporary forms of technological innovation, psychotherapy, and health management techniques, as well as economic enterprise and global organization in ways that often make it difficult to locate the "religious" aspect of the movement. Indeed, in contrast to religious movements that developed in the nineteenth century, contemporary new religions are much more likely to make conscious, pragmatic decisions about whether to define and present themselves as "religious," and whether to seek legal or governmental legitimation as religious organizations. Other groups, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna) and the Transcendental Meditation movement, are more accurately described as cultural transplants, often of Asian origin, and are new only in the sense that they are new to the West. These groups may display the institutional characteristics of their societies of origin, but, in order to succeed in their new surroundings, they often adapt their teaching methods, simplify their parent mythologies, and relax requirements for participation. Finally, some groups are so

novel in their beliefs that they defy characterization according to a source tradition. UFO groups, for example, such as the Unarius Academy of Science, Heaven's Gate, the Raëlians, and the Aetherius Society, combine late modern mythologies of extraterrestrial contact with a wide variety of spiritual and devotional practices to produce new religious movements that seem almost unique.

There are, however, a number of models that scholars have developed which help enormously to chart the landscape of new religions in late modern society. A concept that we will follow throughout this book is that of the "unseen order." In his famous Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1902, William James defined "the life of religion" as "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" ([1902] 1994: 61). This definition has three principal benefits. First, it does not limit "religion" to those traditions that believe in a supreme being of one kind or another, but allows for a greatly expanded understanding of religious belief and practice. Second, this expanded understanding sets aside issues of "authenticity" that have so exercised stakeholders in the cultural discourse around new religious movements. It precludes the temptation to establish whether something is "true" or not. Third, and perhaps more importantly, it avoids what we call the "good, moral, and decent fallacy," the popular misconception that religion is always a force for good in society, and that negative social effects somehow indicate false or inauthentic religious practices. The "unseen order" of the Aztecs, for example, postulated the existence of a war god, Huitzilopochtli, who fought eternally with a number of other gods to ensure the prosperity of the people who worshiped him. To maintain his ability to fight, Huitzilopochtli needed a steady supply of blood, hence the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. While this was almost certainly also a mechanism of social control, in order to maintain a "harmonious adjustment" to the "unseen order" as the Aztecs understood it, as many as 20,000 men and women per year had their hearts cut out with an obsidian knife.

In any religious tradition, the vision of this unseen order does two important things. First, it motivates the development of particular explanatory narratives, religious myths and beliefs that describe the nature of the unseen order, interpret its relationship to the everyday world, and explain the path to realizing one's supreme good within it. Second, these mythic narratives are reflected in prescribed behaviors, religious rituals and practices that connect adherents to the unseen order in such a way that its reality and power are manifest, meaningful, and, for the practitioner, undeniable. What distinguishes new religious movements from established

religious groups *culturally* is the specific emphases in their myths, beliefs, rituals, and practices – how significantly they differ from those of the dominant culture.

In many cases, new religious myths stand in opposition to the legitimating beliefs of the larger society and to the dominant social conventions that govern human relationships. While Unificationism accepts the Bible as true, for example, it challenges traditional Christianity through its assertion that the divine revelations received by Sun Myung Moon unlock hidden truths that remain unavailable to non-members. In the theology of the Children of God/The Family, all established churches – to which David Berg referred derisively as "churchianity" – are considered illegitimate because they turned their backs on God, and accepted instead a material, corrupt, and satanic existence. The Raëlians treat the traditional Christian interpretation of the biblical creation myth as the product of profound misunderstanding. They believe that humans were created not by God, but by an advanced, extraterrestrial race called the Elohim, which they translate as "those who come from the sky." These Elohim developed the capacity to create life from DNA and selected Earth as an experimental laboratory. This oppositional stance is also evident in the emphasis various new religions place on the ways in which humankind has become separated from its original purpose, a separation that has led to all the evil, corruption, and suffering in the world. Our willful disobedience to God's plan, for instance, and the contemporary moral decay and rootlessness that result from it, are prominent themes for both Unificationists and members of the Children of God/The Family. Other groups, such as the Church of Scientology and Ramtha's School of Enlightenment, believe that humans have lost touch with their own godlike qualities and have become trapped in a material world that separates them from their essential divinity.

Each of these visions of the "unseen order" manifests in practices through which practitioners seek to realize their own "supreme good." Like their myths, new religious rituals and practices are often oppositional in nature. Scientologists believe that the practice of auditing helps them overcome the debilitating effects of traumatic experiences, most of which have accumulated over a multitude of lifetimes. Recognizing Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han as their "True Parents," and acknowledging the Rev. Moon as Lord of the Second Advent, brings Unificationists into harmony with God's original plan for humankind. Members of the Children of God/The Family believe that by reinterpreting many of the Christian Church's longstanding positions on human sexuality they have brought themselves closer to Jesus' mandate to make love the basis of all human relationships. And, for

advanced practitioners of Transcendental Meditation, TM-Sidhi and yogic flying brings the material world around them into balance with the unseen order of Natural Law.

In many (arguably most) traditions, religious community is organized around the dictates of mythic and ritual systems. In the specific organizational means through which they seek to harmoniously adjust themselves to their vision of the unseen order, new religions also differ *socially* from established religious groups. Although new religions are rarely "new," but almost always constitute contemporary rediscoveries, recombinations, or reinventions of beliefs, practices, and rituals embedded in much older traditions, certain of their social characteristics are distinctive (cf. Barker 2004; Bromley 2004; Melton 2004). Since the movement *organizations* are new, for example, converts constitute the majority of first-generation membership and provide the primary source of passion and zeal in the movement. Usually, converts to new religions are not representative of the general population. In the case of the groups we discuss in this book, most draw on the same general segment of the population: white, middle-class, well-educated young adults. The movements are often led by charismatic figures whose revelations self-consciously challenge the established social order, and whose charismatic authority is a primary unifying force within the movements. Because they are new, there is no established organizational tradition, and groups often change organizational form rapidly and frequently as they adapt to the variety of pressures and challenges encountered over the course of their life cycles.

From this perspective, new religious movements can be viewed as experiments in building consensus for a new or improved version of the unseen order, in promoting advanced or more efficacious techniques for accessing and interacting with that order, and in persuading others to participate with them in establishing an organized social presence based on "harmoniously adjusting" to that particular vision of the sacred. Typically, controversy ensues when new religions begin to apply their vision of the unseen order, when the experiments they conduct challenge established social arrangements – in some cases in relatively minor ways, but in others dramatically and fundamentally. Sometimes, opposition is small and scattered, but more foundational conflicts with the established social order can lead to powerful oppositional coalitions that bring dominant institutions into direct conflict with new religious movements. It is under these conditions of high tension and conflict that opponents most often refer to new religions as "cults," a term that expresses their unwillingness to grant them any kind of social or cultural legitimacy. Used thus, "cult" becomes little

more than a propaganda term – a means of discrediting new religions from the outset, and obviating any need to learn more about them. Following a lengthy class discussion on the ways different interest groups define the term, one of our students caught this point, commenting rather wryly, "So, Professor, what you're really saying is that 'cult' is just a four-letter word for any religion someone doesn't like."

Controversy and the Popular Perception of New Religious Movements

Part of our task in this book is to present a carefully drawn picture of new religions, to demonstrate that each of them has a history (not simply a present), that each has devout followers who choose that religious path of their own free will, and that, like all religious organizations, new religions are subject to change, development, and evolution. It is important to note, however, that these chapters present necessarily brief surveys and these movements are often complex, highly nuanced in their beliefs and ritual practice, and have undergone significant changes over the course of their existence. Indeed, since the first edition of this book, Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church, has passed away, setting the stage for one of the most important processes in new religious survival: organizational routinization following the death of a charismatic leader. While we have chosen to present these movements in the context of controversies for which each is known, this is only because these controversies have helped define both these particular groups and public response to new religious movements in general.

A controversy, however, is not a point in conceptual space, blinking into existence when some arbitrary line of social or cultural opprobrium is crossed. It is a range of conditions and behaviors, from relatively low-level concerns about whether a group can legitimately call itself a religion to full-blown confrontations between a new religious movement and official agents of the state. Some of what develop into controversies begin within a group – the Raëlian movement's claim in 2002, for example, that one of its subsidiary organizations had successfully cloned a human being, or the 1997 suicides of the Heaven's Gate "Away Team." Others, however, develop as a result of forces that converge from the outside. But for the ill-conceived raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) on the Branch Davidian residence in February 1993, which was aggressively supported by members of the secular anticult movement and apostate Branch Davidians, few people

outside the small Texas community of Waco had ever heard of David Koresh and his followers. Indeed, prior to the raid, 96 percent of those living in and around Waco itself reported that they knew little or nothing about the group (Baylor Center for Community Research and Development 1993: 4). Thus, it is logical to conclude that of the many hundreds of new religious movements in late modern society, the majority exist with little or no fanfare at all. The reality is that many new religions have not risen to the level of public notice as a result of conflict, and any challenge they present to dominant social mores or religious beliefs is low level, at best.

While we have used particular controversies as lenses through which to view specific movements, two aspects of this are important to note. First, these controversies do not define either the history or the totality of the group. Heaven's Gate, for example, is much more than simply the 1997 suicides, just as the Branch Davidians are much more than the 1993 tragedy at Ranch Apocalypse. Moreover, the circumstances of their dramatic denouements make any generalization between them problematic at best. Second, few of the controversies we consider in this book are limited to the groups discussed. For example, while we discuss the issue of brainwashing and deprogramming in the context of the Unification Church, numerous other religious groups – both new, and dominant or traditional – have been accused of brainwashing followers and been subject to attack by coercive deprogrammers, so-called "exit counselors" and "thought reform consultants." Charges of sexual deviance, sexual exploitation, and child sexual abuse have been a staple of countermovement criticism of new religions for centuries. But, as the recent sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church amply demonstrate, these charges are hardly limited to new religious movements.

This is not to say that problems do not occur, that there are not occasionally egregious violations of civil and human rights within new religious movements. The important point, though, is that these violations can (and do) occur within the context of many religious organizations and that new religions should not be unduly stigmatized because of them. New religions should be held accountable when such deviations occur, but the fact that they are new religions should not be a priori evidence that these deviations either will occur or have already taken place – especially on no more solid ground than being called a "cult" in the newspaper or on a blog post. Similarly, distinctions must be made between the leadership in new religions and what we might call the rank-and-file membership. Like any other large and complex organization, only a relative few are in control of the agenda for a particular group. Line workers at an automobile production

plant are rarely if ever privy to the decision-making process about what direction that manufacturer will take. Equally, few rank-and-file Scientologists have any input into the direction the Church of Scientology takes as an organization.

One of the most common battles new religions are forced to fight is for simple recognition as religions. While the first two groups we discuss face similar problems of social legitimacy, each has chosen to establish its credibility in different ways. Because it has no commonly recognized status worldwide, the Church of Scientology is an excellent example of the struggle many new religions face for official recognition. In the United States, the Church of Scientology has been granted (then lost, then won again) its 501(c)3 status, the designation conferred by the Internal Revenue Service that grants religious organizations tax exempt status. In Canada, on the other hand, Scientology is still not officially recognized as a religion, while in France and Germany it has been placed on watch lists developed to identify "dangerous cults and sects." In 1997, the group was banned in Greece, and a 2003 decision by the Greek government upheld the ban, rejecting the Greek Church of Scientology's application for official recognition as a religion. In an effort to gain official standing and cultural legitimacy, the Church of Scientology has aggressively employed a number of techniques, including gala events to celebrate one or another of its social reform agencies, carefully orchestrated openings of new buildings around the world, the testimony of celebrity members as spokespersons, and often problematic attempts to win the favor of new religion scholars.

Claiming almost as many practitioners worldwide as the Church of Scientology, the Transcendental Meditation movement has chosen the opposite road to social and cultural legitimacy. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brought the practice from India after studying for many years with his guru there, and initially organized his practitioners as the Spiritual Regeneration Movement. Once he moved to the West, however, he quickly established a number of different organizations designed to attract practitioners from a wide range of the population. The majority of these represent TM to the public as a scientifically validated meditation practice that produces tremendous personal benefits among practitioners, but which is neither a religion per se, nor affiliated with any particular religious tradition. In fact, while critics disagree, TM practitioners emphatically deny that there are religious components to the practice at all. Thus, if Chapter 2 asks the question "When does a therapeutic practice become a religion?," Chapter 3 considers whether a meditational practice rooted in an ancient religious tradition can be marketed as a secular therapy.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the concept of the "dangerous cult," and the means by which that concept is socially constructed and reinforced. Although there are some dedicated followers of TM who devote most or all of their time to furthering the practice of Transcendental Meditation in late modern society, the vast majority of those who practice do so on their own, often as part of what has been loosely described as the New Age Movement. Though we prefer to consider the New Age a subculture rather than a movement, Chapter 4 examines one (or two, depending on your perspective) of the most prominent proponents of the New Age, JZ Knight and Ramtha, the 35,000-year-old Atlantean warrior she claims to channel. From her residence in the small community of Yelm, Washington, Knight operates Ramtha's School of Enlightenment (RSE), an "American Gnostic School" that claims more than 5000 students worldwide. Although neither Knight nor her students consider RSE a religion, like the Church of Scientology and Transcendental Meditation, Ramtha's School of Enlightenment offers its spiritual products on a fee-for-service basis, something for which enthusiasts are willing to pay and from which they appear to gain a greater sense of meaning for their lives.

When people are willing to pay handsomely for spiritual products, however, detractors are quick to question the means by which adherents have been parted from their money. As Chapter 5 discusses, in the popular press and among the secular anticult movement this kind of behavior often results in allegations of "brainwashing" and "thought control." By the 1970s, Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church became the lightning rod in the United States for charges of religious brainwashing. Prompted by the concerns of parents and friends of those who had joined the group, an anticult ideology quickly coalesced and forcefully asserted that Moon was only one of a number of unscrupulous religious leaders who used a variety of "mind control" techniques to enslave followers and, among other things, bilk them of their possessions. Arguably the best known of the cult controversies, the brainwashing/deprogramming debate has been at the heart of new religion studies since its inception and provides an excellent introduction to some of the other disputes in which new religions have been involved, and other transgressions of which they have been accused.

Although obvious differences such as devotee clothing (e.g., the Hare Krishnas) and communal lifestyle (e.g., Heaven's Gate) often set new religions apart, the question of sexuality – particularly accusations of sexual license among adherents and sexual abuse against minors – is common in the social construction of cult controversies. Because of their

sexually idiosyncratic lifestyle, which has involved both "flirty fishing" and open marriage between members, few new religions have come under such scrutiny for the problem of sexuality as the Children of God, now known as The Family International. Of the numerous "Jesus Movements" that emerged from the counterculture of the 1960s, The Family remains one of the best known, and while it considers itself an evangelical Christian movement, many of the revelations claimed by its members place the group well outside the Christian mainstream. As Chapter 6 discusses, of all the innovations generated by these revelations over its nearly 40-year history, The Family's experimentation with revolutionary sexual practices has had the most impact on its public image and produced a legacy with which the movement continues to struggle.

Public image, and the media stockpile from which that image is most often drawn, can have devastating effects on a new religious movement. From the moment BATF agents attempted a "dynamic entry" at the Branch Davidian residence on February 28, 1993, to the morning of April 19, when that residence went up in flames and took the lives of more than 70 Branch Davidians, the crisis in Waco, Texas held the attention of the world's media. Throughout the siege, the official version remained (and remains to this day) that federal agents were engaged in the lawful execution of their duties and were met with deadly force by "heavily armed religious cultists." Chapter 7 discusses how, by misrepresenting the beliefs of marginal religious groups, by relying mainly (or solely) on apostate, anticult, or "official" testimony, and by refusing to consider the views of social scientists whose insights could have defused inflammatory reporting, mainstream media has demonstrated time and again that there is little "good news" for new religions when reporters arrive on the scene.

As we have pointed out, new religions often come to public awareness through the media only when there is some type of violence associated with them. The issue of new religions and violence, however, is far more complex than mainstream media ever report. This was the case in 1997 when 39 members of the Heaven's Gate UFO group committed suicide in expectation of their resurrection to another evolutionary level. News media and dedicated countermovements were quick to link Heaven's Gate with other well-known examples of religiously motivated violence. While the 1978 mass suicide of Peoples Temple in Guyana has been interpreted as a desperation response to a crisis situation, and the Branch Davidian tragedy wrongful death at the hands of the US government, the mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe can be considered a positive response to the group's belief

that a major prophecy had been fulfilled. Through a discussion of Heaven's Gate, Chapter 8 raises the important question of whether or not all types of religiously oriented violence are comparable.

Following in some ways from the discussions in Chapters 7 and 8, new religious streams of modern Paganism – Witchcraft, Wicca, and Druidry, to name just a few – have also had to contend with the issue of media stereotyping. Building on deeply embedded cultural fears of Witchcraft dating back hundreds of years, the most common form of this stereotyping makes either an implicit or an explicit equation between modern Witchcraft (or Wicca) and Satanism, as though the former were little more than a subset of the latter. Sketching the history of Wicca from its mid-twentieth-century beginnings in Great Britain – though recognizing that modern Paganism encompasses a much broader range of beliefs and practices than just Wicca – Chapter 9 points out how, though covens and ritual working groups are no less susceptible to infighting, personality conflicts, and theological disputes than any other religious community, Wiccan beliefs, principles, and practices demonstrate clearly how distinct Wicca is from Satanism.

With a few obvious exceptions, we have chosen to begin each chapter with a brief biography of either the movement's founder or one of the more important leaders in its development. The reason for this is simple. Though many religious groups and movements are highly institutionalized and often give the impression of being impersonal, it is important to remember that there are people behind and at the heart of each. Without Joseph Smith there would be no Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, without A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) would likely not exist, and without L. Ron Hubbard anything resembling the Church of Scientology would remain the stuff of science fiction. We then consider the beliefs and practices of each group, and its organizational development, though, as readers will note, in some cases we feel it makes more sense to reverse this order. Next, we direct our attention to a particular controversy that has come to be associated with that group or movement. Though there are other avenues we could have pursued in this regard, and some readers would undoubtedly have chosen different strategies, these make sense to us in terms of how these specific groups have been conceptualized in wider society. Finally, we consider specific methodological issues that these groups raise for the study of new religions, and each chapter concludes with a list of significant reference works should readers wish to follow up on that particular group.

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Chapter 2

The Church of Scientology: The Question of Religion

> *Scientology fulfills the goal of religion by addressing the spiritual nature of man and his role in eternity. Yet it approaches the traditional questions of religion from a standpoint of reason, an approach that science can hardly argue with. The scope of Scientology is immense. The full body of knowledge that comprises the religious Scripture is contained in more than 40 million spoken and written words on the subject – all by L. Ron Hubbard, the source and founder of the Scientology religion.*
>
> Church of Scientology International,
> *Scientology: Theology and Practice of a Contemporary Religion*

In a wide variety of publications, the Church of Scientology International (CSI) claims to be "the fastest growing religious movement on Earth" (see, for example, CSI 1998, 2004a, 2004b) and "arguably the only great religion to emerge in the twentieth century" (CSI 1998: 561). From the opening pages of its seminal text, *Dianetics* (Hubbard [1950] 1990), to the nearly 100 sermons contained in *The Background, Ministry, Ceremonies and Sermons of the Scientology Religion* (CSI 1999), Scientological literature is filled with similar declarations. The latter, for example, tells us that "Scientology is the most vital movement on Earth today" (CSI 2002: 166), and that "in Scientology, we possess a practical system of ethics and justice, based solely on reason. No such system has ever existed before" (CSI 2002: 389), claims the Church, and "anything religious teachers said or Buddha promised, even the visions of Christianity, are all attained in Scientology as *result*" (CSI 2002: 503).

The Church of Scientology now claims more than ten million members worldwide, with "more than 11,000 churches, missions and affiliated

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groups across 167 nations" (Frago 2013) – nearly double the number of organizations it reported when we published the first edition of this book in 2008. Independent assessments, however, do not support these lofty claims. Rather, they suggest a US membership numbering only in the tens of thousands, with a sharp decline in even these modest numbers over the past few years. Historian Hugh Urban, for example, points out that according to the American Religious Identification Survey, membership fell "significantly from 55,000 in 2001 to 25,000 in 2008" (2011: 206).

While it is often in the nature of religion to make hyperbolic and exclusivist claims – many religious traditions have their own version of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation") – most are at least regarded as religions. Scientology, however, has struggled for acceptance on that very issue. Officially recognized by Australia in 1982, for example, the Church was banned for many years prior to that. On October 1, 1993, after a two-decade battle for reinstatement, the US Internal Revenue Service restored the Church's 501(c)3 tax exempt status as an "exclusively religious or charitable organization." A week later, thousands of Scientologists gathered in Los Angeles to hear the official announcement and to celebrate what the Church considers an "historic victory for religious freedom" (CSI 2002: 236). In other countries, their struggle has been less successful. While Italian courts ruled in 2000 that Scientology does qualify as a religion, and New Zealand granted the Church limited tax exemption in 2002, its application for charitable status in England and Wales was denied a year earlier (Meek 1999). In 2013, the question of whether Scientology is a religion came before the United Kingdom's highest court when two Scientologists wanted to be married in London's Queen Victoria Street org (see below for an explanation of this term). At the time of this writing, the court has reserved judgment (Bowcott 2013).

Over the past decade and a half, though, many western European countries have opposed recognizing Scientology as a legitimate religion. In 1997, a Greek court "called the Church of Scientology a danger to society and ordered it to close" (Carassava 1997). In 1998, after a two-year investigation by Die Enquete-Kommission "Sogenannte Sekten und Psychogruppen" (the Commission of Inquiry into So-called Sects and Psychocults), the Church of Scientology was listed as one of a number of groups German authorities considered dangerous enough to label *verfassungsfeindlich*, a threat to the security of the constitution (Hexham and Poewe 1999; Richardson and Introvigne 2001). Among other things, Germans were urged to boycott films starring Tom Cruise, arguably the most recognizable Scientologist in the world;

Scientologists were forbidden from joining the Christian Democratic Party, and were subject to a regime of government surveillance (Staunton 1996). Similarly, under the 2000 About–Picard Law, France included Scientology among nearly 175 groups it considered a danger to society. Since various branches of the French government had been in conflict with the Church for nearly a decade at that point, many commentators saw Scientology as one of the principal targets of what is arguably the harshest anti-sect legislation in Europe.

Though these actions were criticized by religious leaders, scholars, legislators, and human rights advocates worldwide (see, for example, Kyriazopolous 2001; Richardson and Introvigne 2001; Schoen 2002), and some of the proscriptions imposed in Germany have been reversed, the stigma remains for Scientology and its struggle for recognition continues. However these controversies are resolved, though, whether for the Church of Scientology or for other marginalized religious groups, two principal questions lay at their heart: What is a "religion," and do these groups or movements legitimately qualify?

L. Ron Hubbard and the Origins of Scientology

Whatever its actual membership numbers, Scientology begins (and in many ways ends) with Lafayette Ronald Hubbard (1911–1986), a moderately successful science fiction writer who has become "the source and founder of the Scientology religion" (CSI 2002: xii). Without Hubbard the Church of Scientology would not exist, and the devotion to his writings that marks Scientology today ensures that his influence will dominate for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the Church so values Hubbard's voluminous output that a special organization, the Church of Spiritual Technology, is engraving his entire corpus on steel plates that the Church insists will last for more than a thousand years. Once engraved, these plates will be stored in specially designed titanium containers buried deep in the New Mexico mountains. In the event of a global catastrophe, Scientologists believe that Hubbard's teachings will be crucial for rebuilding civilization (Leiby 2005).

As is often the case with new religious movements, critics and devotees tend to agree on the broad outlines of the founder's life, but diverge dramatically over the details. So it is with the Church of Scientology and L. Ron Hubbard. Born in Tilden, Nebraska, Hubbard's father was a Navy ensign, his mother the daughter of a small-town veterinarian. By all accounts, while growing up the redheaded young Ron was convinced he

was destined for greatness. By the late 1930s, he was supporting himself writing pulp science fiction stories for such magazines as *Astounding* and *Unknown*. Indeed, between 1929 and 1941, he claims to have published 15 million words (CSI 1994: 11), the equivalent of 200 mass-market novels. Hubbard was commissioned into the US Naval Reserve several months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and worked in a variety of capacities through World War II. Though there is considerable dispute about whether he ever saw any real combat, his military career ended at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland, California, a few days after Japan surrendered.

Hubbard returned to writing in the late 1940s, and in 1950 published both the seminal article on Dianetics – the precursor to Scientology – in *Astounding Science Fiction*, and the full-length treatment, *Dianetics*, which he subtitled *The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Hubbard [1950] 1990). Putatively meaning "through the soul," Dianetics taught that the true spiritual essence of the human being – to which some religions refer as the soul or the spirit, but which Hubbard later called the "thetan" – was trapped and restricted by a myriad of "past experiences of loss, pain and unconsciousness" (CSI 2002: 16). Through "dianetic therapy," these harmful accretions were "cleared" and the person returned to what Hubbard considered the normal state of human being.

Through such works as the 16-volume *L. Ron Hubbard Series: The Complete Biographical Encyclopedia*, which are issued under the auspices of the Author Services Center, the Church paints a rather more dramatic portrait of Scientology's founder. For Scientologists, his is "a life like no other." His father, for example, is routinely referred to as a "naval commander," and Ron a precocious boy who excelled in everything he tried. While the family was living in Helena, Montana, young Ron is said to have befriended members of the local Blackfoot tribe, who taught him their secrets and initiated him as a "blood brother" at the age of six. While still a teenager, he claims to have explored remote areas of Asia by himself, visiting Buddhist monasteries in western China, roaming the steppes with nomadic Mongol bandits, and learning occult secrets from a Chinese magician whose lineage extended to the court of Kublai Khan. In the early 1930s, "already an expert in many different cultures" (CSI 1998: 35), he enrolled in George Washington University, and later "embarked on international ethnological expeditions to the Caribbean and then to Puerto Rico" (CSI 2002: 88). At the outbreak of World War II, Hubbard was "ordered to Australia where he coordinates intelligence activities," later serving as the commander of a convoy escort vessel and a subchaser (CSI 2005). According to the Church,

in addition to being a prodigious writer, Hubbard was an accomplished director, composer, choreographer, philosopher, essayist, and cinematographer/photographer – each of which was marked both by thorough and comprehensive study, and by his unique contributions to the field. Without exception, Hubbard is presented as an intrepid explorer, daring pilot, master mariner, philosophical visionary, scientific and artistic genius, and religious virtuoso.

Just as the Church of Scientology maintains both public and private teachings, exoteric material intended for general consumption and esoteric information reserved for devotees, a similar practice shapes their evolving biography of L. Ron Hubbard. Publicly available material – principally the Church's main web sites – present rather general, uncontentious information about Hubbard's life. More controversial claims – stories of Hubbard's many singular accomplishments that have long provided fodder for critics of Scientology – are presented within the context of Church membership, participation, and literature intended for devotees. Although many of these often extraordinary claims are disputed (and in some cases disproved) by critics, it is important to remember that what Scientologists have done is not so much *biography* as *hagiography*. That is, they have created a "saint's life," a compelling story of their central religious figure, which is a common practice in religions both large and small.

Whatever the biographical reality, Hubbard initially submitted his investigations into the workings of the human mind and spirit to the American Psychological Association, but was thoroughly and somewhat summarily dismissed, a circumstance that helps explain the virulence with which Scientology has attacked psychiatry and psychology ever since. The same year that *Dianetics* was published, Hubbard opened the Dianetics Research Foundation and began to offer classes and train individuals in "auditing," the counseling technique he was developing. According to the Church of Scientology, which was officially founded in 1954, "by late fall of 1950, there were 750 groups across the country applying Dianetics techniques" (CSI 1998: 48). For the next three decades, Hubbard devoted himself entirely to building and expanding the religion of Scientology.

Anyone who spends time visiting Scientology centers, missions, or churches (all of which are called "orgs," and which are currently being restyled to what Scientology officials now term Hubbard's concept of the "Ideal Org"), reading the literature, listening to tapes, or simply observing the physical spaces occupied by Scientology will recognize Hubbard's ubiquitous presence. Auditing practices are designed to follow his written instructions without deviation. The "chapel arrangement" for Sunday

worship services calls for a large bust of Hubbard to be placed at stage right, between the lectern and the Scientology cross. Over half of the 96 official Scientology sermons reference Hubbard directly, and every one concludes by referring congregants either to Hubbard's own works or to Scientology books based on those works. In the manner of setting a place for Elijah at the Passover Seder, every Scientology org, large or small, maintains an office for Hubbard in perpetuity. In Hollywood, California, the Author Services Center stands as a veritable shrine to Hubbard's writings in all their manifold versions, editions, and translations, and the Hubbard Life Exhibition is an excellent example of how the Church he founded is constantly constructing and reinforcing his hagiography (see Christensen 2005).

Since his death in 1986, the Church has been led by David Miscavige, who claims to be Hubbard's designated successor and serves officially as Chair of the Board of the Religious Technology Center. Rarely drawing attention to himself, Miscavige continues to locate the authority and veracity of Scientology in the teachings of L. Ron Hubbard. To devout Scientologists such as Miscavige, Hubbard is the founder of the practice, the author of the scriptures, the touchstone of belief, and the guarantor of salvation. To others, however, he is nothing more than a charlatan and a spiritual poseur. In addition to the other reasons considered below, it is often in this difference that the question of Scientology's religious legitimacy resides. If Hubbard was a fraud, how could the religion of Scientology be anything but fraudulent?

Beliefs and Practices of the Church of Scientology

Scientologists refer to their beliefs as an "applied religious philosophy" whose "roots lie in the deepest aspirations and beliefs of all great religions" (CSI 1998: 1) and whose principal goal is "no less than the full rehabilitation of man's innate spiritual self – his capabilities, his awareness, and his certainty of his own immortality" (CSI 2002: 16). As it evolved from Dianetic therapy in the late 1940s to the Scientology religion in the early 1950s and beyond, Hubbard's thought developed into a complex, often abstruse religious philosophy that claims to account completely for the spiritual condition of humankind, the creation and ongoing existence of the universe as we know it, and the meaningful relationship that exists between the two. In simple terms, however, a few basic concepts underpin all beliefs and practices of the Church of Scientology: the reality of spirit; the nature of mind; the

path to salvation; and the ability of human beings to achieve salvation. Scientologists maintain that by understanding these principles and by applying the techniques Hubbard developed (referred to collectively as the "tech"), not only will the individual find infinite and ultimate fulfillment, but the world will eventually be cleansed of all that prevents such fulfillment – crime, drugs, prejudice, and warfare.

Not unlike many other religious systems, Scientology divides the human being into three parts: the spirit, the mind, and the body. The spiritual essence, the "life force" of each person, is called the *thetan*, though Scientologists are quick to point out that persons do not *have* thetans, they *are* thetans. They are spiritual beings incarnate, rather than physical beings that simply possess a soul. Although "the usual residence of the thetan is in the skull" (Hubbard 1988: 64), Scientologists believe that it exists outside the normal frames of spatial reference – "having no mass, no wavelength, no energy and no time or location in space" (Hubbard 1996: 45).

According to the Church, Hubbard's discovery of the thetan places Scientology at the heart of the human quest for meaning and proves that "its origins are as ancient as religious thought itself" (CSI 1998: 561). However, Scientology considers that its understanding of the thetan distinguishes it from other religious traditions, especially Judaism and Christianity, in three important ways. First, while many religions fuse the concept of the body and the soul, the thetan is separate and independent; "the mind and body are vehicles through which the thetan interacts with the material world" (CSI 1998: 561). Second, unlike the three great world monotheisms, Scientologists believe in reincarnation, that the thetan has lived through many, perhaps thousands of lifetimes. Indeed, Hubbard maintains that it was through his investigation of past-life experiences among Dianetics practitioners in the early 1950s that he hit upon the concept of the thetan ([1958] 1977; 1996: 52–63). Third, contrary to Christian concepts of original sin, Scientology holds to the intrinsic goodness of the thetan, but believes that the spiritual essence has lost touch with its true nature. "The spirit, then, is not a *thing*," Hubbard writes (1996: 45). "It is the *creator* of things."

For Scientologists, the mind is the "communication and control system between the thetan and his environment" (Hubbard 1988: 65). Building on his interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis, which the Church claims he studied from the age of 12, Hubbard separated the mind into two components: the analytical mind and the reactive mind. Earlier writings also contain reference to a third part, the somatic mind, but the majority of Scientology's belief and practice revolves around the other

two. The *analytical* mind is the thinking mind, a proactive control mechanism that "observes data, remembers it, and resolves problems" (CSI 1998: 64). Everything the analytical mind observes is stored in "memory banks," and the information is used to serve what Scientologists believe is the "primary urge" of all life – "Survive!" (CSI 1998: 62). The analytical mind, however, does not record painful experiences, whether emotional, spiritual, or physical. These are handled by the *reactive* mind, "a stimulus-response mechanism" that stores each traumatic experience as a separate mental picture called an *engram* (Hubbard 1988: 68). Accumulated over the thetan's various lifetimes and buried deep in the reactive mind, the totality of one's negative experiences comprise one's *time track*, "the source of all travail, unwanted fears, emotions, pains, and psychosomatic illnesses" (CSI 2002: 16). When a person encounters a situation similar to one stored in the reactive mind, that particular engram is reactivated and exerts a negative influence on the person's life.

A common technique used to demonstrate this is the "pinch test." While seated in front of a Hubbard Electropsychometer, which the Church defines as a "religious artifact" for use in its "confessional" and which is most commonly called an *E-Meter* (CSI 1998: 83), one practitioner will pinch another lightly on the arm. In response, a needle on the E-Meter will move. Essentially a Wheatstone bridge, the E-Meter is a low-voltage skin galvanometer that measures changes in electrical resistance across two electrodes that are held by the practitioner. These electrodes are affected by changes in skin conductivity (e.g., sweating) and galvanic contact (i.e., gripping the electrodes firmly or softly), which are reflected in the E-Meter's needle. After a few moments (or even a few months), if the subject is asked to recall the pinch, the E-Meter needle will move as it did before. Scientologists regard this as incontrovertible evidence of the existence and effect of engrams stored in the reactive mind and believe that this constitutes the scientific ground on which *auditing*, their central therapeutic and religious practice, is based.

Scientology's primary ritual, which the Church refers to as "auditing," is "a precise form of spiritual counseling between a Scientology minister and a parishioner" (CSI 2002: 33). Using an E-Meter and strictly controlled sets of questions and directions, auditors (ministers) guide Scientology practitioners (parishioners) through a series of graduated processes designed to identify the particular engrams that have accumulated in their time tracks. Once an engram is located, further questions assist the practitioner to address and eliminate it. The initial goal of auditing is to remove all accumulated engrams, to free practitioners from the

negative influence of past experience, and "to cast off the chains that grow heavier from lifetime to lifetime" (CSI 2002: 34). "The fact is," claims the Church, "Scientology works 100 percent of the time when it is properly applied to a person who sincerely desires to improve his life" (CSI 1998: 215). In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, any lack of success is attributed either to "tech" that has been misapplied by an auditor or to unwillingness on the part of the practitioner to embrace the process fully and honestly.

Auditing proceeds along two parallel paths known as "training" and "processing," and as they complete the various courses, levels, and intermediate steps known as "rundowns," practitioners move up what Scientologists call "the Bridge to Total Freedom" (or, simply, the Bridge). Newcomers to Scientology begin as *preclears*, that is, those who are still in thrall to the reactive mind and the engrams stored within it. Their initial goal is to become *Clear*, a process that requires numerous courses of auditing and which can take up to two years. Clear is the first significant milestone on the Bridge, and once practitioners have "gone Clear" they are considered free from all accumulated engrams and no longer subject to the irrational control of their reactive minds. Scientologists believe that these pneumo-therapeutic results are unique in human history. Indeed, "while the Clear is analogous to the state of awareness in Buddhism called the Bodhi, or enlightened one, the Clear is a permanent level of spiritual awareness never attainable prior to Dianetics and Scientology" (CSI 2002: 16).

Once Clear, a practitioner can move through the 15 upper levels known as OT, or *Operating Thetan*. These advanced courses of auditing are only available at a few select centers around the world, and contain teachings the Church reserves for its most devoted followers. At these levels, auditing is often conducted alone, with the practitioner providing both the questions and the answers depending on the stated purpose of that level. Since the reactive mind was eliminated when the Scientologist went Clear, the main goal of the OT levels is to increase spiritual and mental awareness by reacquainting the practitioner with the "native abilities" of the thetan (CSI 1998: 167), the true nature that has been masked throughout one's time track by the reactive mind. The Church of Scientology International's standard reference work on the theology and practice of the religion states it thus: "In this spiritual state it is possible for the thetan to possess complete spiritual ability, freedom, independence and serenity, to be freed from the endless cycle of birth and death, and to have full awareness and ability independent of the body" (CSI 2002: 37).

Whether preclear, Clear, or Operating Thetan, the various courses of auditing are offered through a strictly controlled organizational hierarchy. Individual churches, or "orgs," are licensed as franchises, and provide auditing services to practitioners on a fee-for-service basis. In many countries, the Church's religious tax-exemption status requires that these fees be called donations, and the Church maintains that it operates on a strictly not-for-profit basis. Introductory courses can be had for less than US$50, though ongoing auditing can cost hundreds, even thousands of dollars per week or more. Upper-level courses are considerably more expensive, and practitioners can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to complete the Bridge. The high cost of auditing has been a source of considerable tension between the Church of Scientology and its critics. While the Church proudly proclaims that less than 2 percent of its membership receives government social assistance (CSI 1998: 467), this makes sense given the high cost of Scientology services. Not all Scientologists pay equally, however. Rather than requiring only a fee-for-service, practitioners are also encouraged to train as auditors and then co-audit each other, something that is said to reduce the cost significantly, and which also serves to reinforce participants' commitment to the Church and its multiple organizations. Those who choose to join the staff of an org and work for Scientology either full or part time may also receive auditing as part of the compensation.

The Organizational Structure of the Church of Scientology

Like its theology, the Church of Scientology's organizational structure is complex, multifaceted, and highly bureaucratized. Each element in that structure is minutely managed, and every org is responsible for following precisely the instructions, procedures, and policies Hubbard laid out in his 12-volume "administrative technology." In broad strokes, every element in the organization falls into one of three main categories: delivery of Scientology services and products; management, support, and public relations services; and community betterment projects.

Delivery services form the ecclesiastical structure of the Church, and range from field auditors (individuals, couples, or small groups who offer introductory lectures and the most basic auditing services) to the Flag Ship Service Organization, which is based aboard the 440-foot MV *Freewinds*, and provides "a safe, aesthetic, distraction-free environment appropriate for ministration" of the highest levels of Scientology auditing and training (CSI 1998: 296). Between these, a number of organizational levels are arranged

hierarchically: Scientology Missions, Class V Organizations, Saint Hill Organizations, Advanced Organizations, and the Flag Service Organization, which is located in Clearwater, Florida and which serves as a "worldwide focal point for the religion" (CSI 1998: 295). Indeed, in 2013 the Church announced the opening of its Super Power Building in Clearwater. Under construction for nearly 15 years, this will be the only location at which Scientologists can access the Super Power Rundown, a set of high-level courses that train advanced members all "57" of their senses, or what Hubbard called their "perceptics."

Each org in the system is licensed by the Mother Church to provide all the auditing and training services available at lower-level orgs, but may not offer courses for which it is not licensed. An important part of the daily routine of any org is the gathering of "stats," a variety of performance indicators that are reviewed regularly and on the basis of which each org's effectiveness is evaluated. Orgs retain the right to deliver services only so long as they maintain quality standards and production quotas set by the Church of Scientology International.

If the hierarchy of auditing delivery services constitutes the ecclesiastical structure of the Church, the various management, support, and public relations services are its corporate structure. Rather than auditing and training, these organizations are responsible for the planning, implementation, oversight, and advertisement of Scientology activities worldwide. The Church of Scientology International (CSI), located in Los Angeles, California, is the corporate head of the ecclesiastical structure – the Mother Church. Through a variety of subordinate organizations, such as Scientology Missions International and the International Hubbard Ecclesiastical League of Pastors (I HELP), the CSI works to ensure the expansion of Scientology worldwide and the penetration of its principles into all levels of society. Formed in 1982, Author Services Inc. (ASI) is the repository of Hubbard's literary legacy, and the agency charged with the continual publication of his works, as well as the maintenance of copyright over those works. In addition to Hubbard's own writings, ASI also produces a number of magazines and books featuring stories about Hubbard and excerpts from his "never before published" work – all of which contribute to the ongoing hagiography of the founder. The Office of Special Affairs (OSA), on the other hand, is "responsible for directing and coordinating all legal matters affecting the Church" (CSI 1998: 541). Many critics consider the OSA to be little more than a rehabilitated version of the Guardians Office, a branch of Scientology responsible for a number of criminal acts in the 1970s, and for which nine Scientologists (including Hubbard's wife, Mary Sue) were fined

and imprisoned in 1979 (see Miller 1987: 336–364 *passim*). There is, however, little concrete evidence to support these allegations.

Scientology is also involved in a wide variety of community service projects, all of which are based exclusively on the teachings of L. Ron Hubbard. I HELP, for example, administers the Volunteer Minister Program, whose members provide services ranging from no-cost counseling services for a wide variety of social and personal problems to help with disaster relief. Through the translation, publication, and large-scale distribution of Hubbard's booklet, *The Way to Happiness*, the eponymous Way to Happiness Foundation promotes a simple moral and ethical code as a panacea for a wide range of social problems. Containing such aphorisms as "Set a Good Example" (Hubbard [1981] 2005: 14) and "Don't Do Anything Illegal" (Hubbard [1981] 2005: 19–21), the foundation claims that *The Way to Happiness* booklet has been translated into more than 90 languages, and more than 67 million copies have been distributed worldwide.

Two other major social projects are Narconon and its related organization, Criminon. Begun in the mid-1960s, Narconon is Scientology's drug rehabilitation program, and uses a strictly monitored regimen of exercise, sauna treatments, and vitamin and nutritional therapy to help patients withdraw from drugs. A series of "training routines" (TRs) similar to courses Scientologists encounter on the Bridge, teach participants how to overcome the various negative influences that contribute to drug use and recidivism. Though in some countries Narconon claims a success rate in excess of 80 percent, detractors maintain that the real rates are considerably lower and various attempts by Scientology to promote the program in public schools have met with stiff resistance (Asimov 2004, 2005). Criminon uses similar principles and TRs to reduce the reoffender population in prison and claims similarly astonishing results. "Less than 1 percent of those who have completed the program have reoffended," the Church proclaims (CSI 1998: 418–419).

In keeping with the central question of this chapter, three particular aspects of the organizational life of Scientology are worth special consideration: the church services Scientology offers, the Sea Organization, and the Religious Technology Center, which is regarded as "the guarantor of Scientology's future" (CSI 1998: 305).

Each Scientology org offers regular weekly services that resemble worship services in traditional Christian churches. Parishioners gather, hymns are sung, Scientology prayers are offered, the Scientology creed is recited, a sermon is preached by the presiding minister, and the congregation takes part in "group processing" – an interactive experience based on Dianetics

principles. Sermons are drawn from Hubbard's writings and teachings and are delivered verbatim from *The Background, Ministry, Ceremonies and Sermons of the Scientology Religion* (CSI 1999). No variation or elaboration is permitted. Though meeting rooms are arranged in very similar fashion to Protestant churches – a central table, a lectern, a pulpit-size copy of *The Background*, a bust of Hubbard, and the Scientology cross – there are no rooms or buildings devoted entirely to this purpose. Within each org, multipurpose rooms become sanctuaries as the need demands and the time approaches. Since worship services are not part of the Bridge to Total Freedom, however, they are not central to the life of many practitioners, and orgs that claim thousands of regular practitioners may see only a handful of the faithful at any given worship service.

For the most dedicated of Scientologists there is the Sea Organization, known as the Sea Org (cf. Christensen 1999; Melton 2003). Described by the Church as "a fraternal religious order," members of the Sea Org "occupy the most essential and trusted positions in the senior churches in the Scientology hierarchy" (CSI 1998: 323). Entrusted with the most esoteric and closely guarded teachings of Scientology, only Sea Org members may offer the highest levels of training and processing. Begun in 1967, the Sea Org takes its name from the original placement of its personnel aboard a number of ships owned by the Church of Scientology. Drawing on his wartime experience and affecting the title of "Commodore," Hubbard dressed serving Sea Org members in quasi-naval uniforms. Like many other religious orders, Sea Org members often live communally, receive only nominal compensation for their efforts, and have dedicated themselves entirely to the furtherance of Scientology. This commitment is symbolized by a "billion-year contract" that each member signs (CSI 2006b).

Finally, there is the Religious Technology Center (RTC), what many regard as the real power behind the throne in the Church of Scientology. Most importantly, the RTC holds the trademarks to all the "religious technologies" of Dianetics and Scientology (CSI 1998: 306). Formed the same year as Author Services Inc., which is charged with maintaining the purity of Hubbard's writings, three components comprise the mission of the RTC: ensuring that all Scientology and Dianetics services are delivered in precise accordance with the instructions left by Hubbard; counteracting those who infringe on the trademarks or copyrights attached to those teachings; and protecting the integrity and orthodoxy of the "tech" through an elaborate system of self-reporting, practitioner surveillance, and an international network of Inspectors General. According to the mission statement of the RTC, "Scientologists across the globe view

the maintenance and incorruptibility of their religious technology – in precise accordance with the founder's source writings – to be essential to their very salvation" (CSI 1998: 307). Indeed, the Church maintains that "only by exactly following the path it outlines can mankind achieve spiritual salvation" (CSI 2002: 45).

The Church of Scientology and the Question of Religion

Scientology posits an unseen order in which the universe ultimately consists of pure energy (*theta*) and out of which individual expressions called *thetans* have emerged. As thetans, we actually create material existence as we experience it, and the material world has no existence beyond the reality thetans attribute to it. However, by taking on material form, thetans gradually separated themselves from their true essence and, over many lifetimes, the debilitating effects of negative experiences in the material world accumulate as *engrams* stored in the *reactive mind*. Scientology is dedicated to revealing this unseen (and largely unknown) order, to clearing away the impediments that keep practitioners from understanding and experiencing reality as it actually is, and to reconnecting practitioners with their true nature as *Operating Thetans*. By engaging in Scientology's rituals – mainly, participating in ongoing auditing and Scientology course work, and moving along the Bridge to Total Freedom – practitioners free themselves from the restrictions of the material world. Like devotees in other religions, Scientologists regularly testify to the profound personal transformations they have experienced through their practice, fully expecting that any problems they encounter can be eliminated through diligent and consistent auditing. Indeed, during this lifetime and throughout the lifetimes ahead, they believe they will continue to express the strength and abilities of the Operating Thetans they truly are.

The transition from Dianetics therapy to the religion of Scientology occurred in stages, each of which brought the unseen order more clearly into focus for practitioners, but which also placed the organization further at odds with dominant society. Recall, for example, that it was the reports of past-life experiences among Dianetics practitioners that led Hubbard to posit the existence of the thetan, one of the fundamental components of Scientology as a religious system (see Hubbard [1958] 1977; Hubbard 1996: 52–63). The movement's evolving mixture of therapy, technology, and religion, however, quickly drew the attention of various government regulatory agencies, some of which took action

based on allegations of improper claims concerning Scientology's healing practices. In 1963, for example, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) raided Scientology offices and seized 100 E-Meters and two tons of related documents, charging that the Church's claims for the E-Meter's medical effectiveness violated statutes regarding false or misleading advertising under the federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Eight years later, in early June 1971, when the case finally went to trial in Washington, DC, the government argued that use of the devices constituted a "substantial public hazard." Scientology's lawyers, on the other hand, contended that the E-Meters were religious in nature, and that the government had no right to interfere with their use as religious artifacts. Less than two months later, although the court condemned the use of E-Meters as "quackery," it ruled that Scientology met the legal standards for consideration as a religion, and ordered the return of the devices and the accompanying documents. Scientology, however, could only continue to use them for religious purposes, and was enjoined to refrain from any claims to secular, medical benefits.

Scientology has staked a claim as an "applied religious philosophy," and has sought official recognition as a religion in every country where it maintains a presence. Further, it has clearly appropriated the various trappings of dominant North American religion – particularly Christianity, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. Those who provide Scientology services, whether through auditing or more need-specific counseling, are called "ministers" and "chaplains," and go by the title of "Reverend." As clergy do in other faiths, they provide significant rites of passage for Church members – weddings, funerals, and "naming ceremonies," which are analogous to Christian baptisms and christening – and are often pictured wearing clerical garb normally associated with Christian pastors. The E-Meter is considered a "religious artifact" and auditing a form of "spiritual counseling" that occurs within the confines of a "confessional." Hubbard's writings are regarded as the sacred scripture of Scientology. The Church has invested a number of its trademarked symbols with significant religious meaning – the Scientology cross and symbol, the Dianetics Symbol, and the symbols for Clear and Operating Thetan.

While there is no question of its religious significance for many Scientologists – or its relevance for scholars of religion – the issue of whether the Church of Scientology should be accepted as a religion has generated considerable and often contentious debate. Though Scientology counts many high-profile celebrities among its most faithful followers – Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Kirstie Alley, Jenna Elfman, Chick Corea, Lisa

Marie Presley, Isaac Hayes – media coverage has often been less than complimentary to the Church as a whole. In a 1991 *Time* cover story, Richard Behar called Scientology "the thriving cult of greed and power," and a number of American newspapers have published multipart investigations into the Church that have highlighted the most negative aspects of its history (see, for example, Sappell and Welkus 1990; Mallia 1998; Sommer 2005). The *St Petersburg Times*, the local daily for a Florida town just south of Clearwater, where Scientology maintains its Flag Service Organization, has been unrelenting in its criticism of the Church, especially surrounding the 1995 death of Lisa McPherson, a Scientologist who died while in the care of the Church. The Internet, of course, has also allowed critics a virtually unlimited venue for attack, and many have taken significant advantage of this. Dutch fundamentalist Christian Anton Hein, for example, regularly refers to the Church as a "hate group" on his numerous web sites, and other opponents have continued to post sensitive Church esoterica online (see Cowan 2004a).

On the other hand, numerous scholars who have studied Scientology argue that it adequately fulfills all the various criteria by which social scientists evaluate religious traditions – substantive, functionalist, comparative, and so forth (see, for example, Beckford 1996; Frigerio 1996; Kelley 1996; Melton 2000; Cowan and Bromley 2006). Though scholars do not profess to evaluate a group's theological validity, Scientology clearly possesses a "system of beliefs or doctrines which relate the believers to the ultimate meaning of life" (Flinn 1994: 2). Further, this system of beliefs results in both "norms for behavior" and "rites and ceremonies" (Flinn 1994: 2), and it "[unites] a body of believers or members so as to constitute an identifiable community" (Flinn 1994: 3). Not surprisingly, though, given the nature and purpose of Scientological practice, many scholars also report that since adherents take a utilitarian approach to Scientology, what we might regard as overtly religious aspects (such as meeting regularly for worship) are less significant in their lives. Even longtime critic Stephen Kent, who maintains his fundamental opposition to the Church, concedes that "the historical reasons behind Scientology's religious claims, as well as the organization's selectivity in making the claims, do not diminish the probability that many Scientologists view their commitment as a religious one" (Kent 1999b).

Why, then, is there such debate over Scientology's claims to and credentials as a religion? There are four principal reasons: appearance, expense, ambiguity, and secrecy.

First, however much it tries, there are a number of dimensions on which Scientology does not appear to match the profile of groups traditionally

regarded as "religious." That is, for many people it just doesn't look like a religion. It does not maintain church buildings or sanctuaries; there is no deity central to its religious practice; and for the majority of Scientologists weekly worship services are incidental at best. For millions of people, without these dimensions in place, Scientology can never legitimately claim the title of "church."

Second, there is the issue of expense. When it made the transition from therapy to religion, Scientology retained the fee-for-service basis on which Dianetics was originally offered, and, indeed, has continued to expand its religious product line ever since. Because of this, critics contend that any claim to religious status is expedient at best, spurious at worst, and is deployed only to serve the transnational business interests of the organization. Both Stephen Kent (1999a, 1999b) and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (2003) have published lengthy articles arguing that Scientology is little more than a multinational corporate empire that purports to be a religion solely for the purpose of securing the social benefits available to religious groups – most notably tax relief, though in some countries this includes state recognition and access to educational systems. Others suggest that it is precisely Scientology's claims to religious status that have allowed what they regard as its "deviant business" practices to succeed where so many other similar enterprises have failed (Passos and Castillo 1992). These suspicions about Scientology's ultimate interests are fueled by a conviction that Scientology added religious trappings only to conceal its true commercial interests. Scientology, after all, began as Dianetics and later self-consciously chose to organize itself as a church. Indeed, during the late 1940s, Hubbard is believed to have told a group of fellow science fiction writers that "writing for a penny a word is ridiculous … If a man really wanted to make a million dollars, the best way to do it would be to start his own religion" (quoted in Miller 1987: 148). For many people, however, a group either is or is not a religion; it does not calculate whether to become one on the basis of expedience or avarice.

Third, in addition to resembling a business more than a religion in the eyes of its critics, Scientology has blurred the line between religious practice and secular therapy by providing what resemble therapeutic services under the mantle of religion. Not unlike Transcendental Meditation, which we will consider in the next chapter, while Scientology presents itself as a religion, it legitimates its truth claims in scientific terms. Scientology, however, has not only stepped outside the organizational niche that more traditionally religious groups occupy, but has also asserted its interests in what many regard as a profoundly militant fashion. As one Scientology

spokesman candidly stated, "Scientology is something people feel very, very strongly about … It's not a go-to-church-on-Sunday kind of religion. It's an intense religion. If people get in your way, they need to be dealt with one way or another" (quoted in Lattin 2001b). And Scientology has done just that. In its contentious battles with the FDA and the Internal Revenue Service in the United States, and various governmental organizations in Europe, Scientology has publicly alleged that these bodies have proactively and maliciously infringed on individual rights to freedom of religion. In its long-running conflict with the psychological and psychiatric professions, Scientology has referred to psychiatrists as murderers, and the psychiatric profession as nothing more than a gruesome means of social control.

Finally, although some of its teachings have come to light through legal proceedings (see Cowan 2004a), the Church remains intensely secretive about its internal workings and esoteric material. Scientology claims to be among the most open religious movements in the world, but to date the Church has not permitted the kind of systematic social scientific research that has been conducted among a number of other controversial religious groups – Eileen Barker on the Unification Church (1984), for example, or James Chancellor on The Family International (2000). On one hand, this creates the public impression that the Church has something to hide, and that any claims otherwise are little more than attempts to avoid scrutiny. On the other hand, also not unreasonably, Church concerns that their beliefs and practices will be misrepresented, and that this will negatively impact their quest for recognition as a religion, has led Scientology to take a cautious and guarded stance toward scholars, and vice versa (see Cowan 2004b). It is therefore not surprising that mistrust of Scientology runs strong and its claims to be a religion have generated (and will likely continue to generate) such acrimonious debate.

Researching Scientology

One of the core problems in studying new religious movements is negotiating, gaining, and, perhaps most importantly, maintaining access to members of the group, its records, and its organizational footprint, especially financial material. In terms of research methodology, the Church of Scientology is important more for the problems it has presented than the answers it provides. Currently, most writing about Scientology falls into three broad categories. (i) Ex-member accounts, including those resulting from a number of recent, high-level defections from the organization

(e.g., Manny 2009; Miscavige Hill 2013; Rathbun 2013), are often hostile and colored by the authors' negative experiences of the Church. (ii) Journalistic exposés, on the other hand (e.g., Behar, 1991; Reitman 2011; Wright 2013), are often driven by the media appetite for sensationalization, the production pressures and constraints of the 24-hour news cycle, and the basic principles of newsworthiness – the first of which is the negative character of reported events (Cowan and Hadden 2004). Finally, (iii) academic accounts are often based on limited information, secondhand sources, and apostate testimony (e.g., Lewis 2009; Urban 2011). Together, these illustrate three specific problems encountered when one tries to research the Church of Scientology: the problem of access, the potential for cooption and control, and a concern for litigation and reprisal.

Unlike new religions such as the Unification Church, ISKON, and The Family International, the Church of Scientology has been steadfast in its refusal to allow academic researchers unfettered access to current members, church leadership, and organizational records. A few (e.g., Christensen 1999) have gained limited entry to the organization, but none have received the kind of research cooperation offered by these other groups. This means that, for the most part, we lack precisely the data required to answer specific questions about the group: Who joins and how far along the Bridge do they tend to go? How involved does an "average" member tend to be and what benefits do they derive from their participation? Since the Church of Scientology is well known for its lavish facilities, where does the money come from – and where does it go?

Many new religions regard academic interest as a form of legitimation for their organization and some seek to control or influence scholarly output to put the best face on their faith, as it were. Whether implicitly or explicitly, new religions often trade access for more positive representation than they often receive in the press. Here, the researcher walks a fine line: trying to be academically rigorous, which may mean questioning the claims of new religious adherents, but still needing access to those adherents in order to conduct ongoing research (see Shupe and Bromley 1980). When scholars have not conformed to the needs or demands of the group – for example, the Raëlians (Palmer 2001) and Falun Gong (Ownby 2008) – access to the group has been restricted or denied.

Finally, for many academics, the Church of Scientology has been particularly aggressive in its attempts to influence the products of scholarly research – seeking advance copies of papers and conference presentations, for example, in order to "ensure accuracy." Most problematic, though, is the popular fear among scholars that the Church of Scientology will sue

them or their institutions if church leaders are unhappy with the product. Unfortunately, this litigious reputation has been sufficient to dissuade many scholars from pursuing any research into Scientology (see Cowan 2009). Although there is no indication that academics have actually been taken to court by the Church, sociologist Roy Wallis was pressured into including an appendix defending Scientology in his 1976 book, *The Road to Total Freedom*.

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Chapter 3

Transcendental Meditation: The Questions of Science and Therapy

> *The possibility is now at hand for the peoples of all religions to start the practice of transcendental deep meditation and acquire within themselves a state of integrated life by the direct experience of absolute consciousness of the divine being. A religion that delivers to the people a message of doing good but fails to develop their consciousness and fails to elevate them to live a life of all good in a natural manner is merely a religion of words. A religion worthy of the name should be of real practical value. It should directly put man on a way of life full of all good and free from evil.*
>
> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi,
> *The Science of Being and the Art of Living*

In the 1999 European Parliament elections, voters in the UK and continental Europe were treated to a series of campaign advertisements for the Natural Law Party, a political party founded on the principles of Transcendental Meditation (TM) as taught by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. "The best government is nature's government," proclaimed each of the five-minute campaign spots, "natural law, which silently governs the whole universe with perfect order and without a problem. Natural law governs all life, from the galaxies to our solar system, to planet Earth, and certainly our own individual lives" (Natural Law Party 1999a). Claiming unique insights into the laws of nature, Natural Law candidates in Scotland and Wales pledged, among other things, to eliminate genetically modified foods, reduce pollution, and promote natural, sustainable agriculture. Promising free, full-time education through to the university-degree level, candidates committed themselves to "introduce the missing element in modern education, programmes that develop consciousness. Scientific

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research shows that students who practice Transcendental Meditation show significant improvement in intelligence, creativity, and academic performance" (Natural Law Party 1999a). Finally, with the US-led war against the former republic of Yugoslavia "posing the worst threat to peace and stability in Europe for fifty years," UK Party candidate Geoffrey Clements claimed that "the Natural Law Party offers a real and immediate solution to the Kosovo crisis."

> It is well known that Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation reduces stress and increases productivity and integration. It is equally well established by scientific research that Transcendental Meditation in its advanced form, yogic flying, creates the same effects for society as a whole. During yogic flying, there is maximum coherence and integration in brain functioning. When groups of people practice yogic flying it creates a powerful effect of coherence that radiates to the environment, decreasing stress and increasing integration and positivity in the area. (Natural Law Party 1999b)

Like his fellow candidates, Clements cites studies that allegedly demonstrate how Transcendental Meditation and yogic flying practice significantly decrease crime in major British cities, as well as reduce war deaths and conflict in the Middle East. Indeed, two weeks into the 2006 Israeli–Hezbollah conflict, 30 yogic flyers gathered at a hotel on Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) in northern Israel. With only 235 more practitioners, they said, they could "create a shield of invincibility around Israel and bring about an immediate cessation of violence" (Mizroch 2006).

Though the Natural Law parties claim that candidates have been elected to office on the local or regional level, in the 1999 European Parliamentary elections Natural Law candidates rarely garnered more than 50 votes in any constituency, and in the 2001 election fielded no candidates at all. Similar platforms were attempted in Canada in the 1993, 1997, and 2000 elections – with similar results – and the Canadian party was deregistered in 2003. In 1996 and 2000, however, the Natural Law Party in the United States ran quantum physicist John Hagelin as their presidential candidate. A symbolic entry into the race, he received only a relative handful of votes.

Political aspirations notwithstanding, since its introduction in the early 1960s Transcendental Meditation has, like the Church of Scientology, had its share of celebrity supporters, including actors such as Jane Fonda, Mia Farrow, Clint Eastwood, and Stephen Collins, film director David Lynch, and singers Donovan and George Harrison. Unlike Scientology, however,

and quite apart from its origins in Vedic thought, TM has fought not to be taken seriously as a religion, but to be recognized as a scientifically validated means to improve health, intelligence, and general well-being – both personal and social. Since the late 1970s, proponents of TM have tried to introduce a variety of programs into public school systems in North America, Europe, and Australia. Though a New Jersey court ruling in 1977 stopped the teaching of TM in public schools there, supporters consistently maintain that they are not teaching religion or religious practice, but offering scientifically verified techniques for the development of human consciousness. In Canada, for example, though the political benefits of yogic flying proved no more popular with the Canadian electorate than with the European, advocates of TM continue to promote its educational benefits. Visiting a number of cities across the country in 2006, Ashley Deans, the former leader of the Natural Law Party in Canada and currently the executive director of the Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment in Fairfield, Iowa, told educators that "every problem you have in education gets resolved" when children are taught TM techniques.

If the question we considered in the previous chapter is whether Scientology is a religion, the question here is whether a practice like Transcendental Meditation, which emerged out of an explicitly religious context in India, qualifies today as nothing more than a secular and scientifically verified mental therapy.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Arrival of Transcendental Meditation

Prior to 1958, when he founded the Spiritual Regeneration Movement, the organizational precursor to Transcendental Meditation, relatively little is known about Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Paul Mason's hagiography contains the most complete information – as conjectural as much of it is – and maintains that the Maharishi was born Mahesh Prasad Varma in the Madhya Pradesh province of India in January 1917. Part of the Kshatriya, or warrior caste, his father was a minor government official. Young Mahesh was reputedly raised in the midst of a large, loving family, and "his father and mother, uncles and aunts in turn took him upon their knee, generously sharing their sweets and affection" (Mason 1994: 10). He learned the legends and stories of Krishna and Rama, and took from them the lesson of "worshipful obedience" that would follow him throughout his life and be passed on in his teachings. Recognizing that Hindu traditionalism would have to learn to coexist with an expanding modernity in India, his parents

ensured Mahesh received a proper education. He attended Allahabad University, studying both physics and mathematics, though he appears to have been unhappy there. "I was completely dissatisfied with what I studied in college," Mason quotes him as saying. "Because I knew – this can't be the whole knowledge. I was searching for something complete whereby I could understand everything" (Mason 1994: 12).

In 1940, Mahesh met the man who would become his guru, and whose teachings on meditation he would impart to the world: Swami Brahmanand Saraswati, a prominent regional leader in Advaitic (non-dualistic) Hinduism, also known as Guru Dev, a common honorific in India. Before Swami Brahmanand would accept him as a disciple, he required that Mahesh both complete his university education, something which would influence the entire development of the Transcendental Meditation movement, and gain his parents' approval to take up a disciple's life. A year later, in 1941, Mahesh officially became a disciple of Guru Dev, taking the name Bal Brahmachari Mahesh.

Two and a half years into his discipleship, Guru Dev granted Mahesh permission to retire to a cave for *sadhana*, or spiritual practice in seclusion. In the years that followed, Mahesh alternated his solitary practice with time spent at his guru's ashram. There he learned the *Vedas*, one branch of the Hindu scriptures, as well as the practice of prayer and meditation. Mahesh also served as Guru Dev's secretary toward the end of his teacher's life. Guru Dev died in May 1953. Just before he passed, however, he allegedly called Mahesh – who was by then regarded as his favorite disciple – and gave him one last set of instructions. According to Mason, the final exchange between guru and disciple is reported by Mahesh's uncle, Raj Varma. "Look around," he is alleged to have told his young protégé:

> Many people are dejected. There is a lack of energy in their minds. Their minds are not strong enough. What I have taught you also contains the knowledge of the technique for the householder, which has been misinterpreted and forgotten during the centuries. Don't think of money for travelling here and there. Don't worry and don't be afraid of being alone and don't be anxious about anything. Begin working and everything will go by itself. (Quoted in Mason 1994: 23)

In terms of Transcendental Meditation's reception in the West, this concept of "the knowledge of the technique for the householder" is significant. No longer were the techniques of meditation to be held for renunciates only,

reserved for gurus and their disciples. They were now for the householder as well, the second (and largest) of the four traditional stages of Hindu life.

Unable to assume official leadership of their community because he was not of the Brahmin caste, Mahesh moved further north into the Himalayas and spent more time in seclusion and silent meditation. In 1955, he left the mountains and traveled on pilgrimage through southern India. Along the way, people asked him to give informal talks and, eventually, public lectures. He became an enormously popular speaker, and within a few months was introduced as "Maharishi" or "great sage." Speaking to large crowds, significant portions of which would have been in the householder stage of life, Mahesh explained the philosophy underpinning the entire Transcendental Meditation movement: You don't have to be a holy man to achieve enlightenment. He pointed out that "'Om' is the mantra for the sanyasi [renunciates]," and that if a householder were to dabble in meditation using this as his mantra, "he experiences destructive effects in his material life. The effect starts with monetary loss and then goes on to destroy objects of affection, one by one" (quoted in Mason 1994: 30). Put differently, householders' attempts to achieve enlightenment as though they were renunciates are doomed to failure. According to Mason, this was precisely the message his listeners wanted to hear, and his popularity grew even more.

On January 1, 1958, the Maharishi announced the formation of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM). Its objective was simple and ambitious:

> The one aim of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement is to provide a simple and easy method of meditation and infuse this system of meditation in the daily life of everybody everywhere on earth. To meet this end, this Movement has been started to work for the construction of meditation centers everywhere in every part of human habitation. (Quoted in Mason 1994: 33)

Beliefs and Practices of Transcendental Meditation

In TM Maharishi Mahesh Yogi claims to have rediscovered a lost form of meditation that traces its lineage back to *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (circa second century BCE), one of the classic writings of Indian philosophy. TM, however, also incorporates the teachings of Krishna, the Buddha, and Shankara, the famous eighth-century CE Hindu reformer and theologian.

Described as the "Science of Creative Intelligence," Transcendental Meditation uses what it calls the "technology of consciousness" to help practitioners realize their full mental potential. Individuals who achieve "self-realization" – the union of the practitioner's self with the unchanging root of all Being, or Brahman – claim to experience reality more clearly, manifest their own unique identity more authentically, and engage in relationships with others more openly, meaningfully, and peacefully.

Rather than the long and often arduous path followed by Hindu contemplatives who seek self-realization through a strict regimen of prolonged meditation and renunciation, TM allows practitioners in more technologized societies to realize the benefits of meditational practice in just two short sessions a day. Moreover, TM does not teach that practitioners must reject either the material world or the religion to which they may already belong, but rather that through daily meditational practice meditators learn to live in increased harmony with each. Both these points – the limited time meditators must commit to their practice and the lack of any requirement to reject the material world – made TM immensely attractive to Western practitioners.

Maharishi teaches that conscious mental activity occurs on the mind's surface, where it is cluttered and unfocused, while creative thought originates in the still depths of the mind, where the frantic activity of daily life does not reach. Through regular practice of Transcendental Meditation, practitioners gradually calm this frenetic surface activity and concentrate on the creative processes of the deep mind. The technique for this is concentration on a single thought, a *mantra* that is given to new meditators during their initiation process. In keeping with its scientific orientation, TM claims to follow one of the basic laws of thermodynamics, that complex systems become more ordered as activity within them decreases. By decreasing conscious mental activity through meditation, the breathing and metabolic rates are lowered so that the brain functions in a more ordered and organized fashion. Once this has been achieved, the meditator is able to move beyond conscious awareness and experience the realm of pure creative intelligence (see Bloomfield *et al.* 1975).

The basic course in Transcendental Meditation is a seven-step process, the first three of which are offered to the public free of charge. Those interested in TM come first for an introductory lecture (which outlines the benefits of meditation), an initial "preparatory seminar" (which presents the origins of TM and the basics of the TM technique), and a personal interview with an accredited TM teacher. All this takes two to three hours. According to all movement literature, learning Transcendental Meditation

is only possible when taught by a qualified teacher; books, tapes, and DVDs or videos are no substitute.

Like many other religious groups that rely on exclusive truth claims, Transcendental Meditation is very proprietary about its products. According to Scott Lowe, one of the few researchers to investigate TM in depth, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was reportedly concerned that the "innocence" – and, presumably, the unique benefits – of TM would be lost if practitioners studied other meditation techniques or listened to other meditation teachers. "TM is unique and a complete path, he said, so other teachers and teachings should be shunned." Indeed, Lowe notes that "new initiators [TM teachers] signed pledges vowing to 'keep the teaching pure,' with the understanding that deviation from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's prescribed methods would not be tolerated" (Lowe n.d.).

The actual practice is taught one-on-one, in private between the teacher and the new meditator, and lasts about an hour. Though the TM organization denies there are any religious associations, at this session practitioners are initiated in a *puja* (traditional Hindu devotional ceremony), during which a variety of Hindu deities are invoked and the lineage from which Maharishi's spiritual authority derives is venerated. Initiates are asked to bring a clean white handkerchief, a few flowers, and some fruit to present as offerings during the puja. At the heart of the puja is the transmission of the mantra, a Sanskrit word or short sequence of words that is particular to the meditator and that will become the focus of his or her meditational practice. Though the mantra is kept secret between the initiator and the new initiate, and is regarded by both as chosen specially for that person, in reality each mantra is selected from a chart based on the new meditator's age and gender. Despite this fairly mechanical approach, practitioners believe that the power of the mantra resides in its sound, in the precise manner of its pronunciation, and that this must be properly transmitted to the new meditator. The words of the mantra itself have no intrinsic significance and meditators do not repeat the sound aloud during their practice. Rather, during meditation it is repeated internally – it is thought instead of speech. Once this initiation process is complete, new meditators are instructed to practice TM twice daily – 20 minutes in the morning and 20 in the evening.

Over the next few days and weeks, new meditators return to the center to have their practice evaluated, share their experiences with other new meditators, and learn the larger benefits of TM that they should already be able to validate through their own twice-daily

meditations. Although meditators are offered free "check-in" sessions thereafter, and are encouraged to participate in local TM center activities, in reality the vast majority of those trained in the technique do not participate in the organization beyond the initial TM course. Only a very small number go on to train as TM teachers or take advantage of lengthier programs that promise dramatic gains beyond those experienced in daily meditation. In the 1970s, when TM became extremely popular in the United States (see below), adult courses ranged in price from US$135 to $200. At this writing, the basic course taught at a center just outside Toronto, Canada, is over US$1300 (about $1000 *cheaper* than when we published the first edition of this book), and is advertised as "the best investment you will ever make."

Not unlike the Church of Scientology, Transcendental Meditation locates many of the problems humans experience – both individually and socially – as being a result of stress built up over time and, in the case of TM, carried in the nervous system. Through TM practice meditators gradually clear this stress and begin to (re)experience the higher states of consciousness from which the Maharishi taught we have all fallen. As Lowe (n.d.) points out, Transcendental Meditation recognizes seven states or levels of consciousness which humans can attain. Sleeping, dreaming, and waking constitute the first three states, the levels at which those who do not practice TM live their lives. TM practice activates the fourth state, transcendental awareness, which is the first stage on the journey to more fully realized consciousness. Lowe notes that "it is characterized as a blissful state of restful alertness, distinct from the preceding three states" and that "TM scientists have attempted, perhaps successfully, to identify the physiological correlates of this state" (Lowe n.d.).

Over time and through the diligent practice of Transcendental Meditation, this fourth stage "stabilizes," as it were, and the experience of transcendental awareness becomes ongoing, rather than fleeting. In this fifth stage, known as "cosmic consciousness," meditators begin to live in transcendence, as opposed to experiencing it only occasionally and momentarily. From here, as many systems of meditation purport, the meditator can observe the actions of the conscious mind dispassionately. As Lowe points out, however, "critics have claimed that this sounds like a description of depersonalization, a dissociative state viewed as pathological by Western psychologists and psychiatrists" (Lowe n.d.). Not surprisingly, TM practitioners disagree with this assessment. Advanced practitioners can move on to the sixth stage, "God consciousness," in which they "presumably see a celestial, transformed

world," and the seventh, "unity consciousness," about which relatively little is known (Lowe n.d.).

Once again, like the Church of Scientology, Transcendental Meditation claims to produce spectacular results for dedicated practitioners. In addition to the stress relief normally associated with meditative practice and a connection to the pure creative intelligence residing in the depths of the mind, TM promises meditators significant gains in self-confidence, mental comprehension and alertness, physical stamina, and longevity. TM claims that daily practice has a beneficial effect on a wide variety of medical conditions ranging from high cholesterol and heart disease to immune system deficiencies and diabetes, and from eczema, psoriasis, and chronic sinusitis to insomnia, depression, and infertility. As is the case with most therapeutic systems, enthusiasts regularly report breakthrough results, and TM web sites teem with glowing testimonials. "I got to the point where I couldn't do anything," wrote one practitioner, "I was so split. After I started the TM technique, every day just got brighter and brighter. I transcended right away and had many glimpses of pure consciousness. I was finally getting what I'd been looking for but was always missing. Now I'm working again and just got promoted. My energy level has increased at least 200%" (Bloomfield *et al.* 1975: 45).

For those few practitioners who do want to explore Transcendental Meditation in more depth, an advanced program called "TM-Sidhi" ("TM-perfection") was introduced in 1976, and promises even greater results than the basic practice. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* identify over 50 extraordinary benefits that result from spiritual enlightenment (see Patanjali 1990: 183–204). Those who attain this state – which is reached by repeating appropriate words and phrases while in the depths of silent meditation – possess supernormal powers, including the ability to control hunger and thirst, knowledge of one's former lives, extraordinary physical strength, and the capacity to leave one's body and travel in the form of pure consciousness. Though TM-Sidhi practitioners do claim a variety of supernormal powers, ranging from the ability to see objects inside closed containers to the foreknowledge of stock market movements, the best known of these advanced abilities is the "yogic flying" advocated by Natural Law Party candidates.

After meditating to achieve the proper mental state, practitioners of yogic flying sit in the lotus position – cross-legged, the instep on one foot resting on the opposite thigh. From this position they rock backwards and forwards, then bounce until they are able to hop as much as a foot into the

air, landing in the lotus position and immediately repeating the exercise. So-called "flying rooms" in TM centers are carpeted with thick foam pads to prevent injury as groups of yogic flyers hop their way from one end of the room to the other. Regarded by practitioners as a prelude to actual levitation, advocates claim that this ability is possible only through the perfect coordination of mind and body that meditators have achieved through lengthy and dedicated practice of TM. As Maharishi puts it, "We teach our students that by concentration through meditation they can create an impenetrable field of energy between the grounds and their bodies. The greater the field of energy, the higher the meditating man can rise. It is simple QED" (Mason 1994: 249).

In 1986, 10 years after the introduction of the program, a group of yogic flyers demonstrated the practice for journalists in Washington, DC. Though their hopping fell far short of actual levitation, this was not regarded as a setback in any way. Levitation, they believe, actual hovering and floating in the lotus position, is the final stage of development in this practice. Available to TM practitioners who have been meditating for at least two months, the organization claims that more than 80,000 people have participated in the TM-Sidhi program. It is important to note, however, that adherents regard yogic flying as far more than simply personal development. Done by a sufficient number of practitioners, it has significant, utopian social consequences as well. Claiming that the results are "practical, holistic, and scientifically validated," online promotional material proclaims:

> Throughout the world, people practicing the TM-Sidhi program individually and in groups have produced the Global Maharishi Effect – coherence in world consciousness – which has now resulted in the dawn of world peace. As more and more people practice the TM-Sidhi program, thereby increasing the Extended Maharishi Effect, mankind is going to enjoy the supreme quality of life on earth – Heaven on Earth. (Maharishi Vedic Education 2001)

In Maharishi Vedic City, for example, located in Fairfield, Iowa, the Maharishi Vedic Scholar Campus of America provides facilities for 500 "Vedic scholars," Indian practitioners of TM-Sidhi. These "will serve as a silent catalyst to create a group of 8,000 peace-creating Yogic Flying students in Maharishi Vedic City who will create an invincible influence of coherence and harmony in America and permanent world peace" (Vedic Scholars n.d.).

The Growth and Development of Transcendental Meditation

While a number of celebrities have been linked to the Transcendental Meditation movement over the course of its history, arguably it scored its biggest public relations victory in 1968 when, at the behest of George Harrison, The Beatles traveled to India and stayed for a time at the Maharishi's Rishikesh ashram, in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains. Wearing simple Indian clothes, draped in flower garlands, some daubed with *bindi* markings on their foreheads, The Beatles and their entourage were photographed sitting at the feet of their new guru. Although, with the exception of George Harrison, The Beatles ultimately became disenchanted with the Maharishi, in what Cowan has described as "emulative conversion" (2013), their visit brought immediate, worldwide attention to the movement and people clamored to find out more about TM (see also Lapham 2005).

In the early 1970s, as the Church of Scientology has done, TM also gained credibility in North American society when it solicited and received dozens of proclamations from state and local officials supporting the value of its meditative practice (Bainbridge and Jackson 1981: 137–138), and the Maharishi was a frequent guest on popular national talk shows such as *Larry King Live* and the *Merv Griffin Show*. At that same time, academic supporters published scholarly articles on the benefits of TM in such prestigious journals as *Science* (Wallace 1970) and *Scientific American* (Wallace and Benson 1972), something no other group had achieved and which Bainbridge and Jackson consider a more significant public relations success than the Beatles (1981: 136). Today, TM promotional literature claims that the techniques of Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi have been scientifically verified in over 600 separate reports and studies (see, for example Wallace, Orme-Johnson, and Dillbeck 1990).

Aptly labeled a "marketed social movement" (Johnston 1980), Transcendental Meditation has grown into a complex set of interconnected and international organizations encompassing a wide diversity of human interests and concerns. Shortly after he founded the Spiritual Regeneration Movement in India in 1958, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi began to build a network of different organizations designed to train teachers and propagate the TM technique. Despite the fact that the basic meditational practice remains the same regardless of the meditator, rather than offer TM to the world in a "one-size-fits-all" package, Maharishi established a variety of organizations that were meant to appeal to different target audiences. In many ways, this is the genius of his "marketed social movement" approach.

The original SRM, for example, was designed for older, more mature adults. When TM came to North America in 1961, it came as the International Meditation Society (IMS) and brought Maharishi's practice to the general public in a way that was subtly stripped of its religious connotations and underpinnings. Based on the enthusiastic response Maharishi received during a number of university visits, the Students International Meditation Society (SIMS) was founded in 1965 on the UCLA campus and was pitched to appeal to the more intellectually oriented campus clientele. Employing a rhetoric designed to attract yet another potential class of meditators, the American Foundation for the Science of Creative Intelligence (AFSCI) took the message of Transcendental Meditation to the business community.

In 1972, after a seven-day period of silent retreat, Maharishi launched what he called his "World Plan," a vision that has guided the movement and its constituent organizations ever since, and which consists of seven interrelated goals: (1) develop the full potential of the individual; (2) enhance government achievements; (3) realize the highest ideals of education; (4) solve the problems of crime and all behavior which brings unhappiness to humanity; (5) maximize the intelligent use of the environment; (6) bring fulfillment to the individual, family, and society; and (7) fulfill all the spiritual goals of humanity within this generation (cf. Bloomfield *et al.* 1975: 245; Johnston 1980: 340–2). Headquartered in Switzerland, a World Plan Executive Council coordinates the activities of various organizations around the world. Initially, the World Plan called for the establishment of 3600 TM centers to train meditation teachers – one center for approximately every million persons on the planet. In turn, each center would have a thousand teachers, one for every thousand people served by that center.

Within three years of announcing the World Plan, Maharishi began to propagate his vision of TM's potential for world transformation. In 1975 he announced the discovery of the "Maharishi Effect," and proclaimed the Dawn of the Age of Enlightenment. Also known as the "field effect," this concept is based on Maharishi's belief that the universe consists of waves of energy beneath which lies a field of pure creative intelligence. He taught that the collective practice of Transcendental Meditation produces a field of energy that radiates outward, the cumulative effect of practitioner consciousness. Advocates believe this field effect is extraordinarily powerful and contend that if only 1 percent of a given population practiced Transcendental Meditation, a "phase transition" would occur, dramatically increasing social order and harmony. Demonstrable reductions in crime,

accidents, illness, and stress, they claim, would be accompanied by marked improvement in weather, crop production, human longevity, and world peace. Subsequently, TM estimated the number of simultaneous meditators required to create peace in a given region at the square root of 1 percent of the population (Falsani 2002).

Maharishi followed his announcements of the World Plan and the Dawn of the Age of Enlightenment with the establishment of the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment, his vision of a government that would reign in the domain of consciousness. Rather than compete with or seek to replace existing governments, Maharishi's World Government would offer municipal, national, and international bodies the opportunity to develop the critical mass of TM practitioners necessary to realize the benefits of the Maharishi Effect.

In 1971, TM purchased the campus of the defunct Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa, about 80 miles southwest of Des Moines, and established Maharishi International University, which is now known as the Maharishi University of Management. Since then, it has become home to a number of related educational institutions. The Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment, for example, is a private school offering "Consciousness-Based℠ education from preschool to Grade 12." Located on Dr. Robert Keith Wallace Drive, named for the founding president of Maharishi University of Management and one of the first academics to publish on the benefits of TM, the school claims "to unfold the inner genius of every student" and that "our Upper School grades consistently score in the top one percent of the nation on standardized tests" (Maharishi School n.d.). Also located here is the Ideal Girls School, a girls-only college preparatory academy originally chartered in 1996 and moved to the Iowa campus in 2001. Both schools maintain that "Consciousness-Based education provides the missing two-thirds of education. It offers a systematic technology – the Transcendental Meditation® technique – to dissolve stress and optimize brain functioning, to fully develop the knower, and thereby optimize the process of knowing or learning" (Ideal Girls School n.d.).

The Fairfield complex also supports a number of higher education institutions. Maharishi University of Management offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs in a variety of arts and sciences, as well as business and the humanities. Accredited through the same body that accredits numerous state universities in the Midwest, Maharishi University of Management claims more than 700 on-campus and distance education students. Building on one of the British models of higher education, Maharishi Open University offers distance education over the Internet and

in some areas by satellite television. Usually consisting of video presentations of Maharishi teaching on topics such as "Higher States of Consciousness," "The Vision of Total Knowledge," and "The Royal, Invincible Path for Mastery over Nature in the State of Perfect Life," Maharishi Open University also supports the Maharishi satellite television channel. Arguably, though, the Transcendental Meditation movement's two most ambitious projects are the construction of Maharishi Vedic City, also in Fairfield, Iowa, and the establishment of Peace Palaces around the world (see Lowe 2010).

Similar to the World Plan's aim to establish thousands of TM training centers, to spread the influence of the Maharishi Effect around the globe Maharishi proposed building 3000 Peace Palaces that proponents claim can neutralize negative energy in any region where advanced TM techniques such as TM-Sidhi are practiced collectively. Designed according to what practitioners regard as the principles of Vedic architecture and landscaping, like all other TM institutions the Peace Palaces will offer training and practice in both Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi. They will also offer readings in Vedic astrology, Vedic massage and spa treatments, and "Maharishi Vedic Vibration Technology," which uses sound to "enliven the inner intelligence of the body."

Despite the fact that TM has marketed itself in the West as a quasi-secular meditation therapy, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the Vedas, the oldest scriptures in the Hindu canon, for the movement. This is not dissimilar to other recent attempts at harmonizing quantum physics and Eastern spiritual traditions (e.g., Capra 1999; Zukav 1979). Indeed, according to Scott Lowe,

> Maharishi taught that modern physics tells that the world is made of vibrations, and that Om (or Aum), an ancient mantra found in the Rig Veda, possibly the oldest surviving Indian text, is the primordial source of those vibrations. Maharishi further asserted that Vedic hymns provide direct contact with *devas*, the gods of the Vedic religion. Through chanting and Vedic rituals the skilled spiritual technocrat can enlist these deities to produce changes in the mundane world. (2011: 57)

In 2001, the movement established an entire community organized around Maharishi's Vedic science of consciousness. For adherents, Maharishi Vedic City, Iowa, is a model town administered according to the Vedic principles of Transcendental Meditation and governed by Natural Law. It has its own internal currency, the Raam, a functioning city council,

as well as hotels and attractions for visitors. Like the Peace Palaces, buildings are constructed according to the principles of Vedic architecture. Vedic agricultural methods produce organic crops, and Vedic health care is based on naturalistic, prevention-oriented attitudes. Local defense is provided by a permanent group of TM-Sidhi meditators who continually maintain the Maharishi Effect around the community, something adherents refer to as the "Natural Security Agency" (Maharishi University of Management n.d.)

Transcendental Meditation: The Questions of Science and Therapy

For practitioners of Transcendental Meditation, the unseen order is governed completely and irrevocably by Natural Law. In this natural order of things, Absolute Reality and one's innermost self are identical. However, not unlike the unseen order as Scientologists understand it, TM teaches that human beings have lost touch with this Absolute Reality and therefore experience a divided consciousness, a conflict between the illusory experience of the physical world and the unchanging Reality of the Absolute. TM's answers this problem by reuniting the inner self with that Absolute Reality through meditative practice. While material existence is governed by physical laws, individual fulfillment requires application of the Science of Creative Intelligence, a "technology of consciousness" through which individuals can realize their full potential. By practicing Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi, practitioners claim they can attain pure creative intelligence and true fulfillment in all aspects of life.

Transcendental Meditation both mirrors and contrasts the debate over whether Scientology should be considered a legitimate religion. Whereas Scientology began as a therapy and sought recognition as a religion early in its history, TM began as a religious organization and only later presented itself as a therapeutic meditation technique divorced from any religious underpinnings. Conflict emerged, however, when TM began to make a case for itself as therapeutic meditation, and self-consciously chose not to present itself to the public as a religion. Despite its repeated appeals to scientifically validated evidence, TM retains a number of traditionally religious elements and this complicates its claims to any kind of non-religious identity.

It seems clear that when Maharishi began applying and promoting the meditative practices he developed, he was thinking about them in religious terms. The official articles of incorporation for the Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM) in California state unequivocally: "This corporation is a

religious one" (Art. 11); its primary purpose is "to promote spiritual welfare" (Art. 4); and "the spiritual head of this corporation" is Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Art. 6) (Spiritual Regeneration Movement 1959). Since in India generally, and in the Hindu tradition particularly, the distinctions between what is and is not "religious" are not nearly so clear as they are in much of Western society, Maharishi may not have been concerned about the issue when he established SRM in the late 1950s. Indeed, he stated quite explicitly that "one should teach TM in terms of religion where religion is dominant, in terms of politics where politics dominate and of economics where that dominates" (Johnston 1980: 339).

Maharishi soon recognized, however, that the vast majority of Westerners attracted to TM had neither knowledge of nor interest in its spiritual dimensions and religious lineage. They meditated to reduce stress and to improve the quality of their lives. According to Mason, Maharishi observed that "our age of scientific unfoldment does not give credence to anything shrouded in the garb of mysticism. Let us realize the Absolute Being through a scientific and systematic method of achievement where every achievement will be supplemented by the personal experience" (Mason 1994: 48–49). Thus, in order to appeal to the more scientifically oriented audience in the West, around 1970 the transition from a religious practice to a secular therapy began, and the articles of incorporation for the California SRM were amended to remove the words "religion" and "religious."

As TM sought to develop an identity as therapeutic meditation, movement officials began intentionally distancing the practice from its earlier religious orientation. "The Transcendental Meditation technique is not a religion," reported one senior TM official, "it is not a religious practice. It has nothing to do with religion; it's all about developing a total potential brain function" (quoted in Kennedy 2001). At the same time, though, some TM officials privately acknowledged that the new image was simply a tactical change. Indeed, sociologist Robert Bellah recounts a conversation with a faculty member from Maharishi University who told him, "It is certainly true that TM is religious," but that its religious nature was not advertised "for public relations reasons" (*Malnak v. Yogi* 1977a).

In contrast to Scientology, the Transcendental Meditation movement looked enough like a traditional religious group that its therapeutic meditation claims were actively debated. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi came from a Hindu background; he was the favored disciple of a prominent Hindu guru; and he located himself in a lineage of Hindu holy men. Clearly, both the TM initiation ritual and the daily meditation sessions

include elements of traditional Hindu devotional practice. One particular example is the oath to Maharishi that was required of each TM teacher early in the movement's history and which included the words: "It is my fortune, Guru Dev, that I have been accepted to serve the Holy Tradition and spread the Light of God to all those who need it" (*Malnak v. Yogi* 1977b). Most scholarly assessments warrant that TM displays mixed qualities of therapy and religion, but is reasonably included in listings of new religious movements. On this point, sociologist William Sims Bainbridge is perhaps most explicit: "TM was a highly simplified form of Hinduism, adapted for Westerners who did not possess the cultural background to accept the full panoply of Hindu beliefs, symbols, and practices, thus illustrating how a missionary movement may seek to distill the essence of a religious tradition to make it more acceptable to nonbelievers" (Bainbridge 1997: 187). On the other hand, and again unlike the Church of Scientology, Transcendental Meditation has no designated scripture, no set of doctrinal requirements, no ongoing worship activity, and no discernible community of believers. Maharishi himself claimed neither special divine revelation nor supernatural personal qualities.

None of this would have mattered, perhaps, except that TM sought to offer its meditative program in the publicly supported institutions, most notably the public school system. When five public high schools in New Jersey received grant funding from the state Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to run elective classes using Transcendental Meditation techniques, a number of organizations, including the Coalition for Religious Integrity and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, brought suit in February 1976 (see *Malnak v. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi*, in Spiritual Counterfeits Project 1978). While the religious and/or secular nature of TM may have been less significant outside of a legal forum, the issue became significant when the principle of church–state separation was invoked. In his opinion on the case, US District Judge H. Curtis Meanor was unequivocal that Transcendental Meditation had breached the boundary between church and state. The textbook used in the course, *Science of Creative Intelligence for Secondary Education: First-Year Course*, for example, "describes some sort of ultimate reality which in its various forms is given the name 'god' in common usage" (Spiritual Counterfeits Project 1978: 59). In the puja which each student was required to undergo prior to receiving his or her mantra, "it cannot be doubted that the invocation of a deity or divine being is a prayer" (Spiritual Counterfeits Project 1978: 4). Judge Meanor concluded that

"no inference was possible except that the teaching of SCI/TM and the puja are religious in nature," and that "the teaching of the SCI/TM course in New Jersey public high schools violates the establishment clause of the first amendment, and its teachings must be enjoined" (Spiritual Counterfeits Project 1978: 72).

Transcendental Meditation's claims to be a scientifically validated therapy also drew criticism from scientists who contested the movement's research findings of unique, often wondrous effects. TM steadfastly claims that the benefits of its distinctive form of meditation have been verified in over 600 scientific studies at more than 200 independent research institutions in 35 countries (Maharishi Vedic Education Development Corporation 2005). However, a variety of other researchers have argued that many of these studies were conducted by advocates and practitioners of TM, and have challenged the validity of their findings as well as the methods used to obtain them. Confirmation bias, the tendency to regard as valid claims or results that confirm our beliefs, and its near-cousin, expectation bias, our habit of regarding expected results as more significant than unexpected, are two major problems with TM's research.

Some of TM's claims, such as the attainment of higher states of consciousness, are impossible to measure empirically, and considerable controversy surrounds the movement's contentions concerning the benefits of individual and collective meditational practice. Daniel Druckman (2000), for example, found no evidence that TM improved human performance, while Herbert Benson (1974) concluded that Transcendental Meditation is no more efficacious than any other meditational technique. Indeed, a number of researchers conclude that, while TM may be beneficial for some individuals, others may experience negative mental health effects (see, for example, Lazarus 1976; Heide and Bokovec 1983, 1984). Critics also point out that, despite movement claims, there is no discernible, ongoing effect near Maharishi Vedic City, which has one of the highest concentrations of TM practitioners in the world. According to Lowe, however, Maharishi "asserted that the Vedas [and by implication the meditation program based on them] are more complete and accurate than modern scientific theories, precisely *because*, unlike scientific theories, they cannot be falsified. What rationalists would consider a liability becomes an unassailable strength!" (2011: 57). Put differently, use of the scientific method was invoked when it served TM's organizational purposes, but rejected when it did not.

For all this, the social conflict generated by Transcendental Meditation has been dramatically lower than that engendered by the Church of

Scientology. While scientists have challenged the lofty claims made on behalf of TM, they have not contested the basic legitimacy of its meditative practice – as one among many such practices. Although TM's attempts to inject its meditative program into public institutions resulted in a judicial rebuff, they did not constitute a negative evaluation of the program itself. The coalition of opponents to TM in public schools consisted largely of civil libertarians seeking to preserve church–state separation and conservative Christians determined to exclude non-Christian influence in their children's education. Unlike Scientology, the TM movement chose not to assume a confrontational posture in light of these setbacks. Indeed, Bainbridge and Jackson quote Maharishi as saying, "If the law of the country will demand of us that we teach in the name of religion, then fine, we will abide by the law and feel nearer to God" (1981: 155).

Although Transcendental Meditation has also developed in a variety of other directions in which conflict is less likely, this is not to say that tensions have been completely resolved. The movement has not abandoned its attempts to introduce what it now calls "Consciousness-Based education" into public schools, and the controversy resurfaced briefly in the 1990s when a school in Washington, DC was found to have been offering classes in TM for a number of years. More recently, under the auspices of the Institute of Science, Technology and Public Policy, which is located at the Maharishi University of Management, TM advocates conducted a national tour in 2006 to promote "Consciousness-Based education" in public schools. Since the movement insists that its practices offer the single best hope for a traumatized world, it continues to investigate opportunities to spread its message, exploring the possibility of offering Consciousness-Based education in after-school programs or in private schools.

Researching Transcendental Meditation

Unlike the Church of Scientology, which turned pop psychology and relatively simple, "gee whiz" technology into an explicitly religious system, Transcendental Meditation has ostensibly rejected its religious roots and claimed instead that both the unique efficacy of its meditative practice and its impact in the world have been empirically verified. As Scott Lowe notes, however, "the problem with most TMO-sponsored research was the predetermined outcome of the studies. Maharishi had already decreed that TM was a universal panacea; the job of researchers was to confirm this

unquestioned conclusion. Science was useful only to the extent that it appeared to demonstrate the benefits of TM. Evidence of negative side effects was not reported" (2011: 60).

This case presents NRM researchers with a variety of different, though related ways to investigate both the nature of TM's claims and the place those claims have in the context of the meditator's worldview. The problem, of course, is that the group claims to use accepted scientific methods to confirm (rather than test) what cannot, in fact, be falsified. We cannot test directly either the operation or the effectiveness of transcendent power, any more than we can disprove the existence or operation of transcendent forces. In the introduction to *The Demon-Haunted World*, astronomer and skeptic Carl Sagan called TM "perhaps the most successful recent global pseudoscience," and concluded that "not one smattering of real evidence has been offered for [TM's] claims" (1996: 16). That said, Sagan also admits that TM has attracted "a large number of accomplished people, some with advanced degrees in physics or engineering. These are not doctrines for nitwits. Something else is going on" (1996: 19). The question for NRM researchers, then, is: *What* is going on? What is it in TM-produced research reports, for example, that participants find compelling? And how does the organization reinforce the compelling nature of its ongoing story?

One way to investigate TM's claims and their effect on potential clients is to perform a meta-analysis on insider research reports, looking for patterns in methodology, result, research samples, and so forth. Do TM's research methods control for such social psychological processes as confirmation bias (our propensity to regard as true information with which we agree), the validity effect (the more often we see something, the most likely we are to consider it true), source dissociation (our tendency to forget where we learned something, especially something with which we agree), or the availability heuristic (the more easily we can draw something to mind, the more likely we are to regard it as accurate). Another aspect of this kind of meta-analysis examines the ways in which TM-sponsored research is communicated to practitioners. It is all but axiomatic that more meditators will hear about this study or that through TM magazines, journals, and online sources than through the original studies. How, then, are these studies presented? What kind of language is used? How are the reports framed? How are testimonials employed? If the first meta-analysis looks at research methodology, this approach employs aspects of propaganda theory, how information is manipulated and managed toward particular institutional ends.

Further Reading on Transcendental Meditation

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Chapter 4

Ramtha and the New Age: The Question of "Dangerous Cult"

> *In the school, we have connected the aspect of the Divine – you – with science, the probability scale. Our school, and it is a school, is about the collection of worldwide entities from all elsewheres, who have come to study, not the nature of God in the abstract, of God that is out there, but the students who have come are coming to find it in them, to find in you that reason and that connection to the Divine, and how does it work.*
>
> Ramtha, channeled by JZ Knight, Seattle, 2004

"I don't know what you are," said Stanley Krippner in 1997, "but it's clear you're not a fraud" (Satir 1997c: C1). Krippner, a professor of psychology at the Saybrook Institute in San Francisco, was speaking to JZ Knight, a full trance channel who is best known for channeling the entity known among New Age aficionados as Ramtha, allegedly a 35,000-year-old warrior-mystic from the vanished continents of Lemuria and Atlantis. Krippner's remarks came at the end of a conference held at Knight's estate on the outskirts of Yelm, a small community in Washington's Cascade Mountains. For two days, a dozen invited scholars representing a range of academic disciplines presented papers and held colloquia to consider research they had carried out into Knight, her channeling of Ramtha, and Ramtha's School of Enlightenment (RSE), which she operates on her 40-acre ranch. Called "In Search of the Self: The Role of Consciousness in the Construction of Reality," the conference was organized by Knight at the request of J. Gordon Melton, an eminent historian of American religion at Baylor University who was then completing three years of research at the school (see Melton 1998b).

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While sociologists presented research on the demographics of RSE's student population, psychologists pointed out how a variety of physical responses changed when JZ is herself and when Ramtha is channeled through her. Her heart rate, for example, decreases dramatically, her galvanic skin responses are different, and, as one observer notes, "her eyes change from a soft striking blue as Knight to an unfocused deep steel gray as Ramtha" (Harley 1997). Historians of religion demonstrated linkages between the teaching of Ramtha through JZ, and other new thought beliefs taught by women such as Mary Baker Eddy and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founders of Christian Science and Theosophy respectively (Harley 2005). "It's not the point of the conference to determine whether Ramtha exists or not," Melton told reporters, echoing Krippner's comment. "The point is to examine the phenomenon that is Ramtha and the community brought up on JZ Knight's channeling" (Satir 1997a). Although the answers provided at the conference will not satisfy everyone – some still diagnose Knight with disorders ranging from a psychologically dissociative state to demonic possession, while others simply dismiss her as a fraud and her students as dupes – clearly, for thousands of people, Ramtha is a reality, and, indeed, many have moved to the Yelm area to participate more directly in Ramtha's School of Enlightenment.

JZ Knight and Ramtha, the Enlightened One, are part of what has become known both colloquially and academically as the "New Age Movement," a rather amorphous aggregate of instrumental spiritualities, perennial philosophies, personal gnosticism, human potential therapies, and alternative health practices that has blossomed in North America and Europe largely since the 1960s. Although critics are quick to point out that there is very little that is actually "new" about the New Age, nor is it coherent enough organizationally to constitute a "movement" as such, participants are linked by a general belief that humankind stands on the verge of massive personal and social transformation. It is a shared millenarian vision of a "new age" dawning on humanity, in which the individual is the ultimate site of meaning and truth.

More appropriately called a subculture than a movement, the New Age includes practices ranging from belief in the healing power of crystals to the convergence of quantum physics and Eastern religions, from the power of the mind to manifest reality to the empirical validity of psychic phenomena such as telekinesis, past life recall, and remote viewing, and from middle-class shamanism to discarnate communication from entities as varied as Ramtha, Mary Magdalene, Mother Earth, The Assembly of Light, and The One Voice of the Ascended Masters. Since this brief chapter cannot

hope to inventory all the different beliefs and practices that constitute the New Age subculture – the definitive discussion of which remains Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996) – we have chosen to focus on JZ Knight and Ramtha as exemplars of this larger, admittedly more diverse phenomenon. More particularly, though, since new religious movements of all kinds tend to be conflated in popular discourse, often organized around the concept of the "dangerous cult," JZ and Ramtha offer a useful counter-narrative to this stereotype.

Who Is JZ Knight and Who Is Ramtha?

Lauded by celebrities such as Linda Evans and Shirley MacLaine, who wrote passionately about her in two books (MacLaine 1983, 1985), and sought after by thousands of people wanting some communication from Ramtha, in the 1980s JZ Knight was arguably the most famous trance channel in the world. Indeed, in 1985 she appeared on the *Merv Griffin Show*, and two years later *Time* magazine called her "probably the most celebrated of all current channelers" (Friedrich 1987). Today, although she has largely retired from public view and teaches almost exclusively from her Yelm ranch, she remains one of its most recognizable faces. In 2004, for example, the independent film *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (Vicente, Chasse, and Arntz 2004; cf. Bruce 2005), which was written, produced, and directed by three RSE students, and which featured interviews with Ramtha throughout, was one of the sleeper hits of the cinema season. A relatively low-budget docudrama about the relationship between spirituality and quantum mechanics, against all odds it stayed in theatrical release for more than a year, and shipped more than a million copies in the first six months of its DVD release. Two years later, an extended edition, *What the Bleep?!: Down the Rabbit Hole* (Arntz, Chasse, and Vicente 2006), containing nearly 15 hours of additional material, was released to DVD.

Coming into the world as Judith Darlene Hampton, JZ Knight was born in Roswell, New Mexico, on March 16, 1946, a little more than a year before the incident that would make the tiny desert community a mecca for UFO enthusiasts of all types. Growing up in poverty, her toddler years were spent moving around the southwest as her parents sought work as migrant farm laborers. "They picked cotton in the fields," Knight recalls, "and I worked right alongside them" (1997). Her father was an abusive alcoholic whom JZ's mother divorced while her daughter was still young. Moving the children to Artesia, New Mexico, 40 miles south of Roswell,

her mother eventually remarried, but, unfortunately, Knight's stepfather was little better. "I was never told I was loved," she recalls, "or wanted or needed" (Satir 1997b). Issues of self-worth and abandonment would recur throughout much of her life and many of her relationships.

During her childhood years, she found a measure of the acceptance she craved in the local church. Her early religious education was strict fundamental Baptist, and, according to Melton, "through her preteen years, Judith began informally to teach the Bible to neighborhood children" (1998b: 3). "In going to church I fell in love with God," Knight told reporters during the Yelm conference, "because I knew he created us equal" (Satir 1997b). Whether this is an accurate recollection of a childhood faith, or a retrospective enhancement offered in light of her later spiritual experience, the concept of equality is central to much of what Ramtha teaches through her. As a child, she recounts in her introduction to beginning RSE students, "I was able to develop my love of God which was innate in me. And I heard a voice in my head ever since I was a little child and I was able to keep hearing the voice since nobody wanted to know what I thought anyway" (Knight 1995).

Her formal church attendance ended, however, when she, like many others who have struggled to understand what the Bible contains, began to question how God could allow – or condone – many of the acts of barbarism recounted in the Old Testament. When she raised the issue during a church school class, the teacher was unable to answer and instead reprimanded her for a lack of faith (Melton 1998b: 5). A more dramatic break occurred during a worship service when the pastor publicly berated JZ's sister-in-law for wearing lipstick, and JZ walked out in the middle of the sermon. Though she claims that she never abandoned God – or the concept of God with which she had fallen in love – "at 13, I realized the God I loved was not the God being quoted in church" (Satir 1997b).

After a short-lived attempt at both university and business college, JZ married Chris Hensley, a high-school acquaintance, and had two sons, Brandon and Christopher. Chris's alcohol abuse and infidelity, however, ended their marriage shortly after her second child was born. Now a single mother, she worked for a local cable company in Roswell. During this period in her life Judith Hensley began to disappear and JZ began to emerge. Already known to most of her friends as "Judy," which many felt was too informal for her professional position, or "Mrs. Hensley," which did not suit her warm, open personality, her supervisor suggested a more radical name change. Apparently, one of the nicknames she acquired growing up was "Zebra" – either because "she frequently wore

black and white" (Melton 1998b: 7) or "because of her tendency to see life in black and white" (Connell 1997b). Whatever the origin, with that, "Judy Zebra" became "JZ" – pronounced "Jayzee" and spelled with no periods.

According to Melton, Knight recalls a number of instances in her life where precognition and clairvoyance have marked her path to becoming the most famous trance channel in the world. Her mother was given to precognitive dreams, and when JZ was an infant, was told by a Yaqui woman that "this li'l girl of yourn will see what no one else sees … her destiny … important" (Melton 1998b: 3). As a young teenager, JZ and other girls at a sleepover party saw strange red lights coming through the windows of their bedroom. Though they never spoke of the lights, when JZ tried to bring it up years later, she had a psychic episode. Her "vision faded and inside her head she saw a flash of red light. Then she saw herself walking toward and into the light, blending with it" (Melton 1998b: 4). Finally, many years later, while living in Manhattan Beach, California, on a lark she and a friend visited a local fortune-teller. Although the friend had made the appointment, the fortune-teller concentrated on JZ, telling her a number of things about her past, things according to JZ she could not have known. She then predicted that, in the short term, JZ would travel to a place "where it is hot … You will have fire on your back" (Melton 1998b: 2) – something JZ interpreted in terms of a severe sunburn a few weeks later – but, in the longer term, she would be presented with a choice that would decide her destiny: "You will have two offers of work. One will be where the sky is dark with business. The other will be a place with great mountains, tall pines, and lakes that shine like mirrors unto the heavens. If you go to the mountains and pines, you will meet the One. Do you understand?" (Melton 1998b: 2). Not surprisingly, at the time JZ did not understand, but later interpreted each of these events as part of the universal synchronicity that led her to Ramtha, and vice versa.

By the mid 1970s, JZ was living in Tacoma, Washington, and about to remarry. It was the burgeoning of the New Age in North America and things such as crystals, energy work, and pyramid power were all the rage. In February 1977, while experimenting with the power of pyramids to preserve food, JZ playfully placed a cardboard pyramid on her head. As she describes it, this simple act opened the door, the channel, to Ramtha. As she took the pyramid off, "there was this glitter at the end of my little kitchen; glitter like you would take a handful and turn it loose through a ray of sunshine." She continues:

> And there was this light happening at the end of the my kitchen and I was just mesmerized. And there appeared this seven foot tall entity, who was as big as life and he was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life. He had this big beautiful smile on his face, long fingers and long hands, with black dancing eyes … And he looked at me and he said, "Beloved woman, I am Ramtha, the Enlightened One, and I have come to help you over the ditch … It is called the ditch of limitation, and I am here, and we are going to do a grand work together. (Knight 1995).

While JZ may have come from humble, even prosaic beginnings, the same could arguably be said of Ramtha. Most journalistic accounts say little more about Ramtha than that he is "a 35,000-year-old warrior and spiritual adept from the lost continent of Atlantis" (Connell 1997a), a simplification that has led, among other things, to his relentless lampooning as "Hunk-Ra" in the popular cartoon strip *Doonesbury*. A more detailed history, however, is important if we are to understand the cosmology that underpins Ramtha's teachings, the intimate relationship that exists between the channel and the channeled, and the meaning that these have for thousands of people who call themselves students of Ramtha's School of Enlightenment.

According to *Ramtha: The White Book*, one of the principal texts in the RSE canon, Ramtha lived only one life incarnate on this plane (or planet). Like JZ, he was born into poverty and desperation, his people refugees from the continent of Lemuria who were then living "in the slums of Onai, the greatest port city of Atlatia [Atlantis]" (Ramtha 2004: 27). The Atlanteans worshiped the intellect and had built their society on scientific achievement, while the Lemurians developed their spiritual gifts, revering "a power they called the Unknown God" (Ramtha 2004: 28). Despised by the Atlanteans for their lack of technical ability, the Lemurians were used as slave labor, and "considered the dung of the earth, less than a dog in the street" (Ramtha 2004: 29). As a child, Ramtha witnessed his mother raped in the street – both she and the child born of the assault would later die – and his brother kidnapped by a foreign prince. By the age of 14, he had had enough of life, and went into the mountains to do battle with the Unknown God of the Lemurians. Railing against the heavens, Ramtha was visited by "wondrous woman holding a great sword" (Ramtha 2004: 31). She told him to take the sword and conquer himself. Although he did not understand what she meant, he took the sword and went down from the mountain, "a day which was recorded in the history of the Hindu people as the terrible day of the Ram" (Ramtha 2004: 31). Returning to

Onai, he raised an army among the Lemurian slaves and attacked the Atlanteans, opening the granaries to feed the poor before burning the city to the ground.

After the battle, he retreated into the hills with his ragtag army. Hatred drove him, and he led a campaign to erase "the tyranny of men" (Ramtha 2004: 32). "I created war," Ramtha declares (2004: 33). "I was the first conqueror this plane ever knew … I desired to do away with all forms of tyranny and I did, only to become the very thing I despised." Years later, gravely wounded, Ramtha was forced into inactivity and began for the first time to really look at the world around him. As he watched an old woman die, he noticed that the sun rose and set regardless of her death, just as it had over the many battles he had fought and the multitudes of people he had killed. It was then that he returned to the Unknown God, not in hatred but in contemplation. He wanted nothing to do with organized religion, believing that "if man created the God, then God was fallible" (Ramtha 2004: 36). Reasoning that the gods humankind creates are only the projections of their collective hopes and fears, Ramtha realized the first of the truths he would communicate through JZ Knight 35 millennia later, the foundation on which all RSE teachings are based: "You are God."

Over the course of many more years, a series of out-of-body experiences convinced him further of this truth, and through prolonged contemplation Ramtha's body gradually changed, at first glowing, then growing fainter and fainter until he became the wind itself. Returning to his people, for 120 days he taught them the truth he had discovered, then ascended "out of the density of flesh and into the fluidness of thought." "Then I knew," he concludes, "that man truly was, in his essence, God" (Ramtha 2004: 43).

History and Development of Ramtha's School of Enlightenment

When Ramtha informed JZ that together they would "do a grand work," she did not run out and immediately rent conference facilities at a local hotel. In fact, she was more than a bit frightened by the experience. She may have left behind the little Baptist church in New Mexico, but the strict fundamentalist beliefs about the dangers of consorting with evil spirits stayed with her. Fearing that she might be in contact with a demon, or even the Antichrist (Knight 1987: 353), she went to several local clergy for help. Not surprisingly, as Melton points out, this was "a most disappointing exercise" (1998b: 25). No one was willing or able to help her understand

her experience until she met a local Spiritualist medium, the Rev. Lorraine Graham. While talking with Graham, JZ went into trance and Ramtha appeared. Convinced of Ramtha's reality and significance, Graham explained the essential difference between a medium and a channel. While a medium allows a discarnate entity to speak through her, a channel actually vacates her body and allows the discarnate entity full use of it – an experience that is far more rare (Knight 1987: 383).

In late 1978, after a brief period of channeling Ramtha without charge, an endeavor that exhausted JZ and made her deeply resentful of those she referred to as "spiritual freeloaders" (Knight 1987: 441), Ramtha instructed her to charge a fee for attendance at channeling sessions – initially US$100 dollars per person. Though at first she was skeptical, Ramtha questioned why she would not place a monetary value on the teachings he presented and the gift she offered others by allowing Ramtha to speak through her. The money also allowed her some measure of financial independence both from her husband, who was increasingly interested in "the ol' boy" (i.e., Ramtha) and less in her, and to indulge her passion for fine horses. It was also at this time that she met the man she considered her "soul mate," a cowboy from California named Jeff Knight.

During these early years, JZ's public channeling sessions were known as "Ramtha Dialogues," interactive conversations that took place in private homes, New Age shops, church halls, meditation centers, and, later, hotel conference rooms. Participants now paid a few hundred dollars to attend a weekend course, and during each two- to three-hour session, Ramtha would make a presentation, then converse with individuals in the audience. Audiotapes of the sessions were made available, and transcripts collected and published in a series of books. Within a relatively short time, the Ramtha Dialogues made JZ and Ramtha one of the most popular attractions in the New Age community and she was constantly in demand. She even founded a short-lived religious organization, the Church I AM, but Ramtha's teachings did not fit well within the framework of an institution, and the Church I AM closed after a few years. By the mid-1980s, she was traveling around the world to channel Ramtha for enthusiastic audiences from England and Germany to Australia and New Zealand.

In May 1988, however, JZ drastically curtailed traveling, and inaugurated Ramtha's School of Enlightenment at her Yelm ranch. Melton points to two significant circumstances that led to the change in medium by which the teachings of Ramtha were presented (1998b: 71). Those who had initially done advance work for her in New York were no longer involved, and the new local arrangements staff so botched the preparations for a

Dialogue session that JZ canceled the event and refunded participants' money. Because the Dialogues had grown so popular she was suddenly working with local arrangements people whom she did not know and on whose preparations she could not depend. Perhaps more significantly, however, were security issues. A number of news stories – including a major report by ABC's *20/20* – attacked her as a fraud, and members of the evangelical Christian countercult began to portray her as part of a vast satanic conspiracy. Preparations for a major event in Colorado were plagued by menacing telephone calls and, in the end, a bomb threat. As one local paper reports, "During the late 1980s, Knight was shot at while working in her yard. The bullet missed her, and struck the lawn trimmer she was holding" (Pemberton 2006).

More than anything, it seemed, JZ needed a secure environment in which both she and those coming to experience Ramtha's teachings would be safe. Since then, she has maintained Ramtha's School of Enlightenment in Yelm, restricting most of her activities to her beloved ranch. As the first edition of the book went to press in 2008, however, and perhaps building on the surprising success and popularity of *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*, JZ did reach out internationally. Although it's not clear to whom or how these would be offered – perhaps via the Internet – Knight offered "events and seminars … in 22 countries – including, for the first time, the Czech Republic, Romania, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay" (Brenner 2008).

Beliefs and Practices of Ramtha's School of Enlightenment

Despite the occasionally negative comments about her in the press, ex-members who question whether Ramtha is real, and the general skepticism with which New Age activities of this sort are often viewed, JZ insists that she is not a guru, not the leader of any kind of religious movement, and, perhaps most importantly, not a fraud. Indeed, she maintains that in the nature of channeling, when Ramtha is present she is not. Though Ramtha continues to appear to her personally, during the Dialogues and in the teaching sessions at Ramtha's School of Enlightenment JZ allegedly vacates her body and has no knowledge of what transpires during a session. In her autobiography, she describes the first time this happened:

> In the wisp of a moment I felt like a great hand had come and jerked me from my body. I faintly remember seeing the room from the ceiling … everything and everyone seemed frozen. I looked down and saw the top

> of my own head. My beautiful hair was casting a light, something like a bright golden white light seen through a slight mist. Then the misted light filled the room, dancing and flashing like brilliant stones fired by lightning. I somehow *felt* and *knew* that I was part, yet all, of that light. (Knight 1987: 433)

In language reminiscent of those who have reported near-death experiences, JZ recounts how she gradually perceived a brilliant white light at the end of a tunnel and found herself drawn to it. Merging with the light, "I knew and understood all things completely in a fashion that transcended the logical and petty mind. I *knew* that what I had left behind was a dream of the altered state of God: man" (Knight 1987: 433).

The way JZ explains her experience and understands the growth of her school is important. She is emphatic that Ramtha's School of Enlightenment is not a church, not a religious organization, and not a faith. Indeed, it is not about believing something; rather it is about knowing and experiencing for oneself the possibilities of that knowledge. It is a gnostic system firmly anchored in both the ancient esoteric traditions of hidden wisdom and modern reinventions of those systems. Although all promotional material now advertises RSE as "the American Gnostic School," JZ credits Gordon Melton with helping her identify the metaphysical tradition within which Ramtha's teachings and philosophy belong (Melton 1998b: xiii; cf. Ramtha 2004: 287–288).

All of Ramtha's teachings through JZ Knight are grounded in four fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality (Ramtha's School of Enlightenment n.d.):

- the statement, "You are God";
- the mandate to make known the unknown;
- the concept that consciousness and energy creates [*sic*] the nature of reality;
- the challenge to conquer yourself.

Arguably the most difficult concept for students and observers to grasp is the first and most important of Ramtha's teachings: "You are God." Though they may not be able to articulate precisely who or what "God" is, Westerners in particular are socialized from a very early age to make an essential distinction between themselves and deity. Indeed, one of the criticisms that is often leveled at new religious leaders is that they have developed a "God complex," a personality disorder grounded in some form

of malignant narcissism. Ramtha's School of Enlightenment, on the other hand, teaches that there is no such essential distinction between divinity and humanity, that God lives in each person, that "your soul is apart [*sic*] of the Great Soul" (Ramtha 1994), and that the task of every person is to learn this fundamental truth:

> School is about *gnosis*, knowing. It is about declaring that God does not live in heaven. That God is not a man, and he does not have a long grey beard. That God, that is not even Jehovah, that pitiful creature. God is not Jehovah, no God lives in Jehovah; God lives in *you*. That's why you're here on earth. That's why you've lived before. (Ramtha 1994)

The cornerstone of the teachings at RSE is called "Consciousness and Energy℠," or "C&E®," according to Ramtha the two primeval principles from which all reality is manifest. In keeping with many of his gnostic precursors – and incorporating Hindu concepts such as the seven *chakras* and the idea of *kundalini* energy – Ramtha teaches that the physical world is only one of a number of different levels of reality, or "expressions of consciousness and energy" (Anaya 2004: 288). Indeed, what we understand as the physical world is the densest, in many ways the most primitive of all such expressions. Through a variety of teachings, coordinated exercises, and interactive sessions with Ramtha, RSE students gradually learn to recognize that they are in control of the reality they create. For example, beginning students learn to practice C&E® through breath control and the visualization of positive changes they want to make in their lives. Melton notes that, over time, this practice becomes second nature to students, though the real work of transformation can only begin once it has been mastered (see Melton 1998b: 94–103).

C&E® practice is reinforced through practical exercises called "fieldwork." Melton (1998b: 108–111) describes one such exercise, designed for beginning students. On two index cards students draw an image representing something they desire for their lives. These cards are collected and fastened to a fence bounding one of the fields on the RSE property. Students are then led to the field and blindfolded. Beginning with the C&E® breathwork, they are instructed to hold the image of their card while spinning around. Then, they are left to find their own card from among the dozens taped to the fence rails. When students make it to the fence, they are allowed to remove the blindfold and look at the cards directly in front of them. Success is indicated by a joyful shout and often an outpouring of emotion, while those continuing their search carry on blindfolded and in

silence. Melton makes the important point that, in the RSE context, there is a significant difference between the passive reception of information (as in clairvoyance or remote viewing) and the C&E® process as understood by RSE students. In C&E®, students are taught that they are not so much locating their card as creating its location in concert with their desires, then simply reaching out for their creation.

Whether Ramtha exists or not, whether JZ Knight knows that he exists or not, it is clear that many people have found a sense of meaning and purpose through the School of Enlightenment. As one student told journalist Lisa Pemberton, "'This school, these teachings and this truth has saved my life many, many times,' said Stephany Ray, 56, of Yelm. 'The school has taught me to love myself, has taught me and helped me to find the God within me … I always knew there was more to life, but I didn't know what or how'" (2006).

Channeling his messages through JZ Knight, Ramtha describes the essential nature of the universe – the unseen order – as the infinity of Thought, which he teaches is the equivalent of God. A basic dynamic of the universe is that contemplation of thought expands Thought, and that humankind came into existence through this process. Initially, every human being constituted an individual representation of the infinity of Thought, the mind of God. Out of a desire to experience their creativity in material form, these individual entities in turn contemplated the physical universe into being. By assuming a material form, however, they gradually lost touch with their essential divinity and became mortal. Through Ramtha's teachings, and the practices he leads through JZ, students at Ramtha's School of Enlightenment come to understand that God and humanity are in fact identical. Once students learn that it is their own consciousness and energy that create the nature of reality, they are empowered to overcome their apparent limitations and to express their actual divine nature.

RSE and the Question of the 'Dangerous Cult'

In their effort to overcome these various limitations and embody the true nature that Ramtha teaches, RSE students join a legion of other spiritual seekers in the larger New Age movement. In general, those who are open to paranormal phenomena are also those who adhere to some religious teachings, but do not, for example, make the church, temple, or synagogue the center of their lives (Orenstein 2002: 308). That is, they are open to the

reality of an unseen order, but are not willing to be bound by the conventions prescribed by particular religious traditions. In most respects, New Agers are not discernibly different from a cross-section of the well educated, mainly white, middle class. Among other things, New Age seekership requires a certain amount of discretionary time and disposable income. Indeed, a common joke in new religions studies goes: "What's the difference between a New Age seminar and a modern Pagan seminar?" "About a thousand dollars." Though some have argued that the amorphous collection of beliefs, practices, and "self-spirituality" (Heelas 1996) groups that make up the New Age are waning in popularity, empirical evidence suggests that this is not the case. Rather, what we often characterize as "paranormal beliefs" – alternative health practices (which are often related more to metaphysics than Western science), the ability to contact and learn from discarnate entities (whether through a medium such as James van Praagh or a channel like JZ Knight), or a belief in reincarnation (including the ability to recall one's past lives under controlled conditions) – may well be increasing in popularity (Goode 2000; Newport and Strausberg 2001). Further, New Agers appear to be moving from the fringe toward the mainstream of Western society (Orenstein 2002; Bainbridge 2004).

This seems to be the case for RSE. According to RSE sources, there are about 3000 students currently enrolled, ranging in age from mid-teens to late eighties. Consistent with other studies of participation in the New Age (and in religious practice more broadly), the vast majority of students are women. Most were raised within mainstream religious traditions and many have university degrees. Although most new religions have detractors, dissenters, and disgruntled ex-members, sociologist Constance Jones surveyed nearly 600 RSE students in 1996 and reports that, like Stephany Ray, a large percentage describe a greater sense of well-being as a result of their involvement in the school. Others describe "heightened intuition," increased "spiritual sensitivity," and frequent paranormal experiences. Based on her research, Jones concluded that "what we have here is a remarkably normal set of people who have gained a great deal from their association with Ramtha and report that their lives are, without exception, better after their association with RSE" (*Nisqually Valley News* 1997).

Ramtha's School of Enlightenment is probably representative of the vast majority of new religions in the sense that it has provoked relatively little organized opposition. JZ has been involved in a number of law suits, many brought by her for what she considers, essentially, copyright infringement, but has had no high-profile encounters with law enforcement and has not found itself embroiled in public scandal. The RSE is not apocalyptic in belief

and doctrine, nor confrontational in ritual and practice. Although JZ maintains the Ramtha School on her Yelm property, it could not properly be called either a "compound" or a "camp" – militarized terms that are often applied to new religions by both media and dedicated countermovements.

So, why then the question of the "dangerous cult"? As we note at various points throughout the book, it is axiomatic that the vast majority of information about groups such as the RSE we gain through media – mainstream if the story is considered sufficiently newsworthy (see Cowan and Hadden 2004), but more likely now through online sources such as Wikipedia, Internet news sources, and social media. Often, none of these are based on primary research or personal experience, but are either distilled or aggregated from other online sources, sometimes edited to reflect a particular viewpoint, other times simply imported as "shovelware." In this process, it is not uncommon for the issue of a group's "cult status" to be part of media coverage. And, through social psychological processes such as source dissociation (our tendency to misremember where we learned something), the validity effect (our bias toward things we hear repeatedly), and the availability heuristic (our propensity to regard as true that which can most easily draw to mind), once the notion of "cult" is invoked, it is a very short conceptual step to the "dangerous cult." As cultural shorthand, "cult" serves to stereotype and marginalize religious groups whose only offense is being different from the mainstream.

Despite what many would call its religious trappings, the RSE in fact makes no claims to religious status. RSE students emphasize that they are neither followers nor devotees, and that JZ is neither their leader nor their guru. Indeed, the only reason that scholars classify RSE as a religious movement is that its teachings and practices are regarded by students as important and integral aspects of their personal spiritual development, that they structure fundamental meaning in students' lives, and, for our purposes at least, they advert to an unseen order with which students seek a measure of harmony. That is, while it does religious work in the lives of the students, it is not a formal religion. Sociologist William Sims Bainbridge suggests that "the New Age movement is para-religious – comparable to religion and capable of becoming fully religious if it becomes embodied in formal organizations" (2004: 392). Although RSE has the potential to move in a more formally religious direction, since JZ's short-lived experience with the Church I AM the school has shown no inclination to do so.

Second, students do not separate themselves from conventional society and join RSE in the way that people join new religious movements such as

the Unification Church or The Family. That is, although skeptics may consider those who attend the RSE deluded in some way, they are not socially isolated in the ways that many laypeople associate with the notion of the "dangerous cult." Some have moved to Yelm to be close to Knight, but none live on the property with her. Most travel from their homes in various parts of the country to attend sessions with Ramtha and pursue their studies.

Nearly three decades ago, Bainbridge and colleague Rodney Stark suggested a typology to explain participation in beliefs and practices such as those found in the New Age subculture, a framework which is very helpful in understanding the different levels of commitment found in RSE. They distinguished between "audience cults," "client cults," and "cult movements" – though it is important to point out that they did not use the term "cult" in a pejorative way. Rather, for them, a "cult" is simply a religious group or movement that promotes novel beliefs and practices relative to the dominant religious traditions in a particular culture. It is also important to note that these categories are not discrete, but rather points along an organizational continuum, and there are a variety of ways in which they overlap and influence one another.

Put simply, an *audience cult* has little or no organization and participants may never have any contact with one another. For those who participate at this level, and Stark and Bainbridge suggest that these may be in the majority, "membership remains at most a consumer activity," and participants "often do not gather physically but consume cult doctrines entirely through magazines, books, newspapers, radio, and television" (1985: 26). To these sources today, we would add, of course, the Internet. Those who purchase Ramtha books, tapes, CDs, or DVDs, but who did not attend Dialogues or have not chosen to enroll in Ramtha's School of Enlightenment – but who believe they benefit from the teachings nonetheless – populate the audience cult range of the continuum. Since Ramtha materials in all forms have sold in the millions – during her 1992 divorce trial, JZ Knight's income was reported to average $600,000 a month (Maynard 1997) – this suggests a significant number of people have taken part at this level.

Client cults, on the other hand, exhibit "rudimentary organization, in that individual practitioners serve a clientele, such as astrologers casting horoscopes or mediums staging séances" (Bainbridge 2004: 381) – or, in the context of this chapter, JZ Knight channeling Ramtha. Client cult participants are those who from 1978 to 1988 attended the many Ramtha Dialogues that took place around the world. They paid their fee-for-service, and though few developed a personal provider–client relationship with

Ramtha, many took advantage of Dialogues whenever and wherever they could, often traveling long distances and following JZ as she went from Dialogue to Dialogue.

Finally, *cult movements* "are full-fledged religious organizations that attempt to satisfy all the religious needs of converts" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 29). In the case of RSE, out of the much larger, more diffuse client base emerged the relative few who either moved to Yelm or otherwise organize their lives around their participation in Ramtha's School of Enlightenment. They may spend in excess of $1300 for each week-long seminar, and spend much more to purchase the books, tapes, and DVDs for sale through JZK Enterprises. For these students the teachings of Ramtha answer the deepest questions of their lives and assure them that they are in touch with the "unseen order." Nonetheless, even for the group that has chosen to live in or close to Yelm, no students live on the property and there is no regular gathering analogous to a church service. The result is that RSE students face considerably less hostility than groups that stand in a higher level of tension with conventional society. In the next chapter, however, we will turn to a group that, in the 1970s and 1980s, epitomized the popular notion of a "dangerous cult."

This is not to say that there has been no conflict for Ramtha's School of Enlightenment, but it has occurred at a much lower level. As we have already noted, evangelical Christian groups have treated RSE as a satanic deception. A number of hostile media accounts, including ABC's *20/20*, have suggested that Knight is a fraud, and that RSE students are, at best, gullible. For example, one journalist referred to them as "the certifiably eccentric believers in Ramtha" (Zuzel 1997), and *Cosmopolitan* reported that "Knight's former advance man revealed he'd come upon Knight in a non-trance state practicing Ramtha voices" (Rae 1991). Commenting on Knight's appearance in *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*, one reviewer wrote that "she couldn't maintain her Ramtha accent, either, and appeared to have had bad plastic surgery – one would think with her money and connections to Atlantis she could have done better" (Berger 2005).

Like many other participants in the New Age, RSE students are consumers of a particular religious or spiritual product – in this case, the teachings of Ramtha, the Enlightened One, which are provided on a set fee-for-service basis. Media ridicule notwithstanding, what is important to note here – especially in light of the "spiritual supermarket" metaphor that has come to dominate much of the discussion about late modern

religion in the West, and in particular para-religious subcultures such as the New Age – is that those who participate have made a *choice* for Ramtha (or whatever other aspect of the New Age agglomerate they choose), a choice for which they are quite willing to pay based on the perceived benefits they receive from participation, and a choice they feel quite free to change should other, more beneficial options appear on their spiritual horizon. Put this way, what becomes clear is that neither JZ Knight as a new religious leader nor the Ramtha School of Enlightenment manifest what many people consider the hallmarks of a "dangerous cult." And that's the point.

Researching Ramtha

How, then, should researchers approach a group such as this? On the one hand, fundamentalist Christian claims that the Ramtha School of Enlightenment is a satanic deception is a matter of theology and thus not open to strict empirical investigation. Arguments of this kind tend to devolve fairly quickly into questions of whose god is the real god. On the other hand, groups such as the secular anticult movement and, not infrequently, law enforcement, often lump New Age practices and organizations into broad categories based on varying degrees of deception and exploitation. Although JZ Knight may present no "danger" as an apocalyptic leader, that her students expend time, energy, and resources on what many critics consider simple fraud is sufficient warrant to condemn her and her school.

The problem here, as it is in so many aspects of social interaction, is that we have competing claims by different stakeholder groups. Opposition groups assert fraud and deception, while group members maintain that their personal encounters with Ramtha, their experiences at Knight's school, and their relationships with other students have profoundly and positively impacted their lives. That is, they feel better, they *are* better for their participation.

Consider this brief thought experiment. On the one hand, let us suppose that JZ Knight is a fraud, a conscious, intentional con artist who invented Ramtha out of whole cloth and who has been swindling her "students" for decades now. How much more do we know about those for whom participation in the Ramtha School of Enlightenment has had a profound effect on their lives, who have been able to rise above substance abuse, emotional difficulties, even physical problems, as a result of their

involvement with Knight/Ramtha? Conversely, let us now suppose that Knight is entirely authentic about her belief in Ramtha, that there is no deception on her part, and that she genuinely wants the best for any and all who come to the school. Same question: How much does this tell us about why people choose to come, what they consider the benefits and drawbacks to participation, and why they continue in their practice? None of this is intended either to countenance fraud or to intimate the reality of Ramtha. We merely post the methodological question: How do you know?

Often, researchers content themselves with various forms of archival investigation: doctrinal statements, histories and biographies, records of group involvement. These are important when we attempt a well-rounded picture of a new religion, but they only tell part of the story. As Gordon Melton and his colleagues found, though, and as we will see in more depth in the following chapter, *fieldwork* among the new religion itself is crucial to a deeper understanding of the movement. In this case, researchers traveled to Yelm to meet with Knight, who submitted to a battery of psychological and physical tests, to observe the Ramtha Dialogue process, and to interview students as they participated.

Although strict objectivity may be impossible to achieve, in order to do this kind of participant observation with fairness and sensitivity, we borrow a methodological principle from anthropology: *epoché*, or bracketing. Originating in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), this means to bracket one's assumptions about a group or phenomenon for the purposes of more fully understanding the nature the group and of people's participation in it. It is very difficult, if not impossible to eliminate all the social and cultural biases we bring to our research into new religions. We can, however, (i) identify what those biases are, and (ii) work to suspend them for the period of research. Ask yourself, for example, how speaking a particular language influences the way concepts are heard and understood. For someone raised as an English-speaking, North American Christian, the word "God" means something very different than it does for someone who grew up in rural India as a Shaivite Hindu of the *dalit* (untouchable) class. Thus, when Ramtha proclaims the first principle of enlightenment, "You are God," this immediately invokes resistance on the part of researchers raised in environments which regard humans as anything *but* God. Identifying this resistance, then working to bracket the assumptions inherent in it, is the first step toward epoché. We will consider this more fully and from a slightly different direction in the following chapter.

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Chapter 5

The Unification Church/The Family Federation: The Brainwashing/ Deprogramming Controversy

> *The Messiah must be born on earth as a substantial, physical being since he must be the example of the ideal person, the person who has perfected his character, and thus, who has fulfilled the First Blessing. He can only carry out this responsibility in the flesh. He must also realize the ideal family that God has desired, and thus become the True Parent, one who has realized God's Second Blessing.*
>
> Sun Myung Moon,
> *Divine Principle*

To tens of thousands of members around the world, Sun Myung Moon, who died in 2012 at the age of 92, was the messiah returned to earth, the third Adam, and Lord of the Second Advent. Together, he and his wife were their True Parents. To others, though, he was a religious fraud of the first order, a huckster whose machinations ruined the lives of members, former members, and their families. Mass media characterized him variously – as a well-known Korean evangelist, a controversial religious leader, and as the puppet- master of a cult that has "brainwashed" tens of thousands of innocent religious seekers. However he is portrayed, Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012), whose name means "Shining Sun and Moon," was one of the most recognizable new religious leaders of the late twentieth century. He twice addressed the United States Congress, and his wife has spoken before the United Nations. Richard M. Nixon invited him to the White House, and Mikhail Gorbachev to the Kremlin. In 1994, when he inaugurated his Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International, he counted among his guests politicians Gerald

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Ford and George Bush, Sr., religious leaders Coretta Scott King, Robert Schuller, and Beverly LaHaye, and entertainers Bill Cosby and Pat Boone. He has offered financial assistance to numerous conservative causes, including support for Oliver North during the Iran–Contra investigations and for Jerry Falwell's Liberty University when it faced financial crisis. When Moon celebrated his eightieth birthday, former US vice president Dan Quayle, former British prime minister Edward Heath, and Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid were on hand for the festivities. While his virulent anti-communism won him many friends in the West, the Unification Church has been plagued by a variety of controversies – its practice of mass wedding ceremonies, the rigid control wielded by the Moon family over the lives of devotees, personal and financial scandals that have rocked the Church, and the specter of brainwashing that have stalked the organization for decades.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the emerging secular anticult movement (ACM) – loosely affiliated groups of concerned parents and friends, legislators, psychologists, and journalists, all of whom viewed the rise of new religions as a clear and present social danger – portrayed both Moon and the Unification Church as the epitome of everything they were fighting against. Foremost among their concerns, they accused Moon of "brainwashing" converts, of imposing a preternaturally powerful regime of thought control and behavior modification on adherents that ultimately rendered them incapable of independent thought or action. Parents were at a loss to explain the changes in children enamored of Moon and his teachings, and critics argued that a combination of poor diet, insufficient rest, constant monitoring, and intensive indoctrination reduced adherents' will to question the group while increasing their dependence on it. In a manner reminiscent of any number of 1950s horror films, they became, in effect, slaves to the organization and its leadership. For both of these groups, the concept of brainwashing offered a quick, easy, if ultimately fallacious explanation.

Sun Myung Moon: Savior from the East

Born in the small village of Kwanju Sangsa Ri, in what is now North Korea, Sun Myung Moon is inseparable from the popular perception of the Unification Church. As is the case with many controversial religious leaders, accounts of his life vary. Official biographies, which for new religious leaders often take on the patina of hagiography, portray Moon as a

very spiritual youth, who became a Christian at age 10, taught Sunday school at his local church, and who often went alone into the mountains near his home to pray.

As Unificationists recount the story, on Easter morning in 1936, when he was just 16 years old, Jesus Christ is said to have appeared to Moon while he was in prayer and anointed him to complete the spiritual mission of salvation that Christ began nearly two millennia before. Although he did not reveal the contents of this vision for many years, Moon reports that at this point in his life he was constantly at war with Satan, who tried to prevent him from accepting his mission as the new messiah, the Lord of the Second Advent. During this time, though, he claims that he communed with God and sought spiritual guidance from such religious luminaries as Moses, the Buddha, and Jesus. These revelations formed the basis of what would later become *Divine Principle*, the foundational text in Unificationist theology.

In the late 1930s, Moon moved to Tokyo to study electrical engineering at Waseda University. He returned to Korea in 1943 and married his first wife, Sun Kil Choi. That same year, he was arrested for supporting Korean independence from the Japanese and served the first of what would eventually be several prison terms. In 1946, he received another divine revelation, this one directing him to found a charismatic Christian church in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. Not surprisingly, this provoked opposition from both communist authorities and local Christian churches, whose position under the communist government was tenuous at best, and Moon was imprisoned twice more. In 1950, Moon escaped to South Korea and was reunited with his wife two years later. This six-year separation, however, proved too difficult to overcome, and their marriage ended in divorce.

As soon as he reached South Korea, Moon began preaching in refugee camps, and in 1954 founded the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, the organization he led until his death. The following year saw more than 30 Unification Church centers established in South Korea, and in 1956 Moon published the first edition of *Divine Principle*. In 1960, he married Hak Ja Han, a member of the church 23 years younger than he. As part of what Moon regarded as his messianic mission, at the center of which is the family, he and his wife produced 12 children.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the Unificationist movement develop, both internationally and economically. In 1958, Moon sent his first missionaries to Japan, where they quickly attracted followers and financial backing for further international expansion. Within a few years, movement centers were established in a number of western European countries,

including France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. The first Unificationist missionaries arrived in the United States in 1959, establishing three small centers, one on each coast and one in Washington, DC. There was little interest in Moon's message in the US, however, and over the next dozen years the movement largely stagnated. Moon himself visited the US briefly in 1965 and 1969. Following a divine revelation that came to him on New Year's Day, 1972 he moved to the United States permanently, establishing his international headquarters in New York City and small regional centers in most states.

From the moment he founded the Unification Church in 1954 Moon pursued his vision of world unification and under his messianic leadership the restoration of humankind. Although it has experienced a range of difficulties, the Unification Church has established a stable membership base, a solid economic foundation, and political alliances with numerous conservative religious and political leaders around the world. Despite the allegations of brainwashing, and the ugly reality of forcible deprogramming, these alliances have afforded Moon and his organizations a social prominence that is extremely rare among new religions. While Moon worked tirelessly to forge his church, he also built a substantial corporate empire through which he financed his religious mission. A varied array of business interests throughout Asia and the Americas provide the financial resources for the Unification Church. Despite the substantial economic losses of what is arguably its most visible cultural enterprise, the DC-based *Washington Times* newspaper, the Unification Church has had a social and cultural impact well out of proportion to its size.

In the United States, however, both controversy and tragedy have dogged the footsteps of the Church and throughout the 1970s and 1980s the terms "Moonie," "cult," and "brainwashing" were virtually synonymous in the public mind (Bromley and Shupe 1983). Between 1973 and 1986, at least 400 members were forcibly abducted and "deprogrammed" by agents of the secular anticult movement (Bromley 1988). Media coverage was extremely hostile, and in 1978 a congressional investigation linked Moon to Korean intelligence agencies and found that various Unificationist organizations had violated a range of immigration, tax, and banking laws. In 1982, Moon was convicted of tax evasion and served 13 months in a federal prison.

In October 1999, one of Moon's younger sons, Young-jin Moon (b.1978), committed suicide in Reno, Nevada. A year earlier, scandal rocked the Unification Church when Moon's former daughter-in-law, Nansook Hong, published a damning exposé of her turbulent, 14-year

marriage to Hyo-Jin Moon (1962–2008), Moon's eldest son and putative successor. Detailing the years of emotional and physical abuse she suffered at Hyo-Jin's hands, who she claims was also heavily involved in gambling, sexual promiscuity, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, she portrays the Moon household as recklessly extravagant and imperious in its treatment of Church members who serve the True Parents at their New York estate (Hong 1998). Revelations of Sun Myung Moon's own extramarital affairs and children born out of wedlock have disheartened many Church members who accepted Moon's doctrine of sexual indiscretion as the source of original sin.

Throughout his life, though, Moon remained the embodiment of both the economic empire and the new religious movement. Well into his eighties at the time we wrote the first edition of this book, he remained firmly in control of the Unificationist Movement. Although he had clearly planned for a successor, that process too, was not without controversy.

In the last years of Moon's life, his wife, Hak Ja Han Moon, emerged as a more prominent spokesperson for the Church. Twenty-three years younger than her husband, Hak Ja Moon has been on at least three world speaking tours and has addressed a number of national legislative bodies. Elevated by Moon to "True Mother," which made her spiritually parallel to Moon as "True Father," as Moon approached his eightieth birthday in 2000, Hak Ja Moon began to take a more significant leadership position in the Church. Four of his children, all of whom hold professional or managerial degrees from prestigious American universities, were also included in his succession plan. Despite these arrangements, however, Sun Myung Moon did not appear concerned that death would end his leadership. At one point, when asked whether the movement would disintegrate upon his death, he replied simply, "I will continue to lead the church from the spirit world" (Fisher and Leen 1997).

Over the past decade and a half, four of Moon's children have been appointed to some measure of leadership responsibility, both economic and religious, in the larger Unificationist organization. Until Nansook Hong's revelations of his self-destructive lifestyle and then his death in 2008, Hyo-Jin Moon had been considered the nominal successor. In 1998, however, Moon's third son, Hyun-Jin Moon (b.1969), who is also known as Preston, assumed what appeared to be a commanding role within Unificationism. A Harvard MBA married to a daughter of Chun Hwan Kwak, one of Moon's inner circle, Hyun-Jin was appointed Vice President of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International, the movement's primary coordinating organization. This gave him financial control over a

broad range of Unificationist organizations, which included managing profits from the American branch's extensive corporate interests. In a more symbolic move, the theological significance of which cannot be overstated, Moon named Hyun-Jin the "fourth Adam," with Jesus and Sun Myung as the second and third respectively.

The situation became more complex when in 2005 Moon's fourth son, Kook-Jin Moon, also an MBA and a highly successful entrepreneur, was sent to Korea to rescue faltering Unificationist businesses there. Three years later, Moon's youngest son, Hyung-Jin (b.1979; also known as Sean), a Harvard Master of Divinity graduate, was appointed to a number of leadership positions in the Moon organization. At that same time, In-Jin Moon (b.1965; also known as Tatiana), who also has a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard and is married to James Park, another of her father's longtime confidants, was appointed President and CEO of the American Unification Church. According to journalist Mariah Blake, in her *New Republic* article "Fall of the House of Moon," In-Jin's aim, she said,

> was to transform the church into one that people – especially young people – were "dying to join." She renamed the church Lovin' Life Ministries, shelved the old hymn books, and launched a rock band, an offshoot of which played New York clubs under the moniker Sonic Cult. She also discarded the old Korean-inspired traditions: bows and chanting gave way to "Guitar Hero" parties, open mics, concerts, and ping-pong tournaments. (Blake 2013)

In-Jin's attempts at modernization were met with stiff resistance and her own credibility suffered when it became public that she had borne a child in 2012 fathered by Sonic Cult's lead singer, Ben Lorentzen.

In the almost inevitable competition that ensued between the Moon children, Hyun-Jin used his financial leverage to retain the more traditional elements of Unificationism's religious interests, while his siblings sought to establish a more conventional church. Although open conflict among them had broken out before Moon's death in 2012, by 2013 any power-sharing arrangements between the four Moon children was in disarray. As we write for this edition, the putative successors are being forced to resign or relinquish power. Presently, Unificationist leadership appears to be vested in Peter Kim (Hyo-Yool Kim), a trusted insider who served for years as Moon's personal secretary, although Hak Ja Han Moon has also become more actively involved in Church leadership. Since for nearly half a century it was Sun Myung Moon's charismatic authority that

bonded the various national churches, special religious projects, and business interests, this ongoing turmoil raises significant questions about the group's long-term viability. While it seems clear that Unificationism is headed in the direction of more conventional churches, it is far from clear whether it will survive as a single, unified entity.

Doctrinal Beliefs and Ritual Practices of the Unification Church

Like many religious traditions, the doctrinal beliefs of the Unification Church are complex and often difficult for non-members to understand. Redacted and revised over the years by Moon's disciples, they purport to unlock truths previously hidden in Christian scripture and, as new circumstances arise, are in a constant state of evolution. Despite its Christian underpinnings, though, as Lonnie Kliever points out, Unificationist thought and belief contains "elements of Korean shamanism, Confucianism, and Taoism which are imaginatively blended with themes drawn from Roman Catholicism, Presbyterian Calvinism, and Liberal Protestantism" (1982: 215). For Unificationists, "God is the Creator of all things" and "the source of the energy which enables all things to maintain their existence. We call this energy 'Universal Prime Energy'" (Moon 1973: 27, 28). This Universal Prime Energy manifests across a wide variety of "dual essentialities," including male and female, mind and body, and internal character and external form. These dual essentialities participate in what Unificationists call "give and take action," which, together with Universal Prime Energy, constitutes the foundation of existence.

Broadly speaking, Unificationist theology is organized into three dispensations, or historical processes leading to salvation: Creation, Fall, and Restoration. According to the official 1973 edition of *Divine Principle*, Creation is a reflection of God's essential being, a core reality that is both male and female. Through the Creation, human beings were intended to receive three blessings. First, they would perfect themselves and thus take on God's own perfect nature. Second, through the love of God, Adam and Eve would mature spiritually to a point where they would become humankind's "True Parents," whose children would be born without sin. Third, this sinless humankind would have dominion over all creation. As Christian theologians have pointed out for nearly two millennia, though, the problem with this scenario is free will, and in order for this perfect creation to develop and mature, God's love freely given must be as freely returned by humankind. Coercion of any kind obviates the agency on which true love

is based. Unificationists teach that God assumed the majority of the responsibility in this relationship (95 percent), requiring that Adam and Eve live up to only a small percentage. Because even this tiny portion leaves open the potential for mistakes, disobedience, and rejection, the chance remained that this initial perfection would not be achieved – a reality manifest in the Fall of Man.

For Unificationists, the Fall of Man occurred along two interconnected axes – a vertical dimension that tainted the relationship between God and humankind (the Foundation of Faith), and a horizontal dimension that divided humanity against itself (the Foundation of Substance). In turn, the vertical dimension of the Fall has both a spiritual and a physical component. Originally, God planned that humans would occupy a place above the angels in the celestial hierarchy. Jealous over this, the archangel Lucifer subverted God's plan, spiritually seducing Eve while she was still a teenager, that is, before she had fully matured. To Unificationists, this is the Spiritual Fall. The Physical Fall occurred when Eve, through guilt and fear, seduced Adam in a vain attempt to return to her former state. Because their "premature conjugal relationship" was "centered on Satan" and not God, a return to their pristine form was impossible. Since then, all men and women contain both good and evil, elements of the loving God who created them and of the fallen angel who seduced them.

The horizontal dimension of the Fall occurred when Cain killed Abel (Genesis 4:7–9), separating the divine and satanic elements in humanity and setting them at war with one another. Throughout history, the enmity between the primal brothers has been reproduced at tribal, national, and international levels, manifesting most recently in the twentieth-century conflict between atheistic communism (the forces of Cain) and God-fearing democracy (the forces of Abel). During this time, Moon taught that this was a final confrontation between God and Satan, and if communism could not be defeated ideologically then a third world war was inevitable.

Once the vertical and horizontal relationships between God and humankind were broken, social problems ranging from open warfare to economic conflict, and from racism to family breakdown, were inescapable. Restoring humanity to its original place in God's plan has been our task since the Fall, and in Unification theology, human history is the record of the numerous attempts to achieve Restoration. Of course, God is capable of bringing about Restoration unilaterally, but that would once again obviate free will, the human right and responsibility to make moral choices. A voluntary, loving relationship with the Creator, and by implication with each other, is the only foundation upon which authentic Restoration can be built. A crucial

component of this process is what Unificationists refer to as "the principle of restoration through indemnity," a payment or sacrifice that humankind must make for its sins in order to create conditions favorable for Restoration. Once sufficient indemnity has been made, God offers humanity a chance for Restoration.

Like the Fall, the Restoration process occurs in two dimensions: the vertical, which restores the relationship between God and humanity, and the horizontal, which restores relationship between and among humankind. Unification theology teaches that "there must be a central figure to restore the foundation of faith before laying the foundation of all" (Moon 1973: 240), and whose task it is to prepare the way for the advent of the Messiah – an ideal person born without original sin and restored to the Adamic state that existed before the Fall. Throughout history, a number of these "central figures" have appeared, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua. Each was unable to accomplish the task, and the last "central figure" to emerge was John the Baptist, "the second advent of Elijah" (Moon 1973: 500) and the herald of Jesus Christ.

According to *Divine Principle*, God did not plan for Jesus to die on the cross, but rather to marry and "to multiply children of goodness without original sin" (Moon 1973: 141). Through the Messiah, a new human lineage would be established, one centered only and completely on God. Once again, however, humankind was not up to the task. John the Baptist doubted Jesus, and the leaders of the day refused to recognize him as the Messiah. Together, this "finally compelled Jesus to take the way of the cross" (Moon 1973: 153). Jesus did not come to die, as Unificationists point out most Christians believe, but his crucifixion paid the indemnity for humanity's spiritual salvation. Because Jesus was unable to marry, however, to father children and establish the new, God-centered lineage, the physical Restoration could not take place and the messianic mission remained incomplete. Another messianic figure was required to complete the process.

This new messiah would not be the historical Jesus returned to Earth, but a normal human being whom Jesus assists from the spirit world and whom the Bible will help identify. Based on elaborate calculations, Sun Myung Moon determined that the new messiah was born between 1917 and 1930, and that he came from a nation torn between godless communism (the forces of Cain) and God-centered democracy (the forces of Abel). Not surprisingly, both Korea and Moon fit these criteria. The messiah, however, is not preordained, and must complete certain tasks in order to qualify for the messianic role. Before becoming the messiah, for example,

he must become an ideal person – conquering sin, marrying and raising an ideal family, and leading in the establishment of an ideal world. According to the Unification Church, Moon devoted his life to meeting these requirements. Unificationists regard Moon's marriage to Hak Ja Han as the messianic wedding that established the True Family, and, notwithstanding their household scandals and tragedy, believe that the children born of the True Parents are without original sin.

In 1992, at the World Cultural and Sports Festival in Seoul, Korea, Sun Myung Moon announced that he and his wife had completed the mission of the True Parents of humankind. "In early July," he said, "I spoke in five cities around Korea at rallies held by Women's Federation for World Peace. There, I declared that my wife, WFWP President Hak Ja Han Moon and I are the True Parents of all humanity. I declared that we are the Savior, the Lord of the Second Advent, the Messiah" (Moon 1992). With this announcement, Moon closed what Unificationists call "the New Testament Age," and inaugurated "the Completed Testament Age."

When their lifestyle was more communal, Unificationists held informal worship services twice daily – singing, praying, and reading from the Bible and *Divine Principle*. As the movement grew and evolved, more conventional church services developed wherever there were sufficient Unificationists to warrant them. In whatever form, each worship service includes the "Pledge," a personal and communal vow to embody the precepts of *Divine Principle* and to work for world peace. Unificationists also recite the Pledge on the first day of each month and on the holy days of the church's ritual year: True God's Day (January 1); Father's Birthday (February 3); True Parents Day (March 29); Day of All True Things (May 27); Declaration Day of God's Eternal Blessing (July 1); Foundation Day for the Nation of the Unified World (October 3); and True Children's Day (November 21).

By far the most significant Unification Church ritual, and the one for which it is best known, is the Blessing, the mass wedding of couples chosen by Sun Myung Moon to become part of his God-centered lineage through marriage. Building on the belief that illegitimate and misguided love was the principal cause of the Fall, Unificationists seek to reverse the Fall's effects through the Blessing. Indeed, since Unificationism teaches that only married couples may enter the kingdom of heaven, the Blessing is crucial to the church soteriology.

In the early years of the Unification Church, members were required to meet demanding criteria and demonstrate significant spiritual growth before considered eligible for the Blessing. Among other things, each had

to bring in three new members, serve a three-year mission for the Church, and endure a seven-day fast. In practice, though, members often worked for the Church much longer than this before receiving Moon's permission for the Blessing.

When Moon first began the Blessing process, he selected a partner for each candidate based on what he considered his unique ability to know God's will for them. Couples met for the first time at a "matching" ceremony, and were given a short period of time to discuss the proposed match and discover any obvious or immediate incompatibilities. Occasionally, when one potential partner was in another country, matches were made using photographs and the couple often did not meet for several months (Galanter 1989: 147–148). Although some candidates did request another partner, the majority were content to place their confidence in Moon's superior spiritual insight.

The Blessing itself is a lengthy, five-step process, beginning with the Chastening, in which partners ceremonially scourge each other three times to purify themselves of historical sin. Next, the Holy Wine ceremony effects Restoration on the individual level. The bride accepts a chalice of wine from Moon, sips from it, then passes it to the groom, who finishes the wine. In this way, the bride receives "true love" from "True Father." Symbolically reversing the gender-based order of the biblical Fall, she is freed first from the Fall's satanic lineage and grafted into Moon's messianic bloodline. Now reborn herself, by passing the wine to the groom she offers him a sinless rebirth. The empty chalice is then returned to Moon in reverse order, completing the process. The holy wine for this ceremony is said to contain a trace of the wine used at Sun Myung Moon's marriage to Hak Ja Han in 1960. Unificationists believe that this original wine contained a small amount of Moon's blood, and has the capacity to transform the lineage of the recipient. Thus restored to a sinless state, children born to the Blessed couple are considered spiritually perfect.

The Holy Blessing ceremony itself includes a number of traditional wedding elements. The Moons sprinkle holy water on the bride and groom to symbolize their rebirth as a Blessed couple. Vows recited have less to do with the couple's love for each other – they have, after all, only recently been introduced – than with their commitment as a new family to the principles of Unificationism. They exchange rings, and are declared husband and wife under the mantle of God's original blessing. At the end of the Blessing, all the couples join Moon in shouting *Mansei!* (eternal victory).

A 40-day separation period follows the Blessing. This ends with the Transference of Love ceremony, when the marriage is physically consummated. Disclosed to non-members only in the most general terms, the Transference of Love includes ritual washing and closely prescribed sexual intimacy. After this, couples reaffirm the spiritual foundation of their marriage and begin domestic life together.

Gradually, Moon began to delegate authority for matching couples and formed National Blessing Committees to facilitate the process. Staffed by Blessed wives, these committees match eligible candidates based on information the candidates submit about their partner preferences. Candidates are expected to be at least 24 years old, and to have been Unificationists for at least three years. Not surprisingly, given the size of some of the mass weddings, the ceremony itself has been radically simplified, as bride and groom declare their intentions and share a chalice of holy wine. With the exception of the 40-day separation period, all other "indemnity" conditions have been removed.

In 1992, however, Moon dramatically expanded the Blessing process by accepting non-Unificationists as potential candidates. In the mid-1990s, the process was expanded again in the Heaven and Earth Blessing, which is intended to integrate the physical and spiritual worlds by reuniting the spirits of dead spouses with their living partners. Further, in a theological shift not unlike the Baptism for the Dead among Latter-day Saints, members' ancestors who are residing in the spirit world are now candidates for Blessing. Finally, the Unification Church has extended the possibility of liberation, Blessing, and Restoration to saints and sinners throughout history. In 1998, for example, to create a foundation for the liberation of all those in Hell, symbolic Blessing ceremonies were conducted for Lenin, Hitler, and Stalin. Though hardly residents of the underworld, symbolic Blessing ceremonies have also been conducted for the Buddha, Socrates, Augustine of Hippo, and the Prophet Muhammad.

The Growth and Organization of the Unification Church outside Korea

Although the movement had been slow to take hold originally, when Moon immigrated to the US in 1972 and took personal charge, he found a ready supply of young people in search of meaningful alternatives to the crumbling counterculture of the 1960s. Over the next five years, the Unification Church grew from a few hundred full-time members to several thousand.

Moon's tireless recruitment of middle-class young adults, the high rate of membership growth, and the substantial economic resources he brought to the task created a high public profile – one which almost inevitably led to charges of spiritual manipulation and financial impropriety. Recruitment success, however, was short-lived. Only a tiny proportion of individuals approached by Unificationist recruiters actually joined the movement, and most new members remained active for only a very brief time (cf. Barker 1984; Galanter 1989). Currently, the Unification Church claims to be active in nearly 200 countries around the world, and estimates its worldwide membership at three million, mostly in Korea and Japan. Scholars, however, suggest that more realistic estimates place the international membership at several tens of thousand, only a few thousand of whom are Americans (cf. Barker 1978, 1984; Fisher and Leen 1997).

The Unification Church movement is a complex network of interests that can be organized into three broad categories: business, outreach, and public relations. Unificationist businesses use their profits to fund various movement missions, which directly serve the Unificationist goal of world Restoration. Outreach organizations, on the other hand, are non-profit and contribute to the larger aim of world unification. Public relations services, which sponsor tours, rallies, various media, and special events, organize and produce a seemingly endless series of speeches, convocations, and conferences intended to promote the Rev. and Mrs. Moon's ongoing quest for recognition as humankind's True Parents.

Moon's original business interests in Korea and Japan were widely diversified in the industrial sector, and included mining, construction, manufacturing, and pharmaceuticals. In support of Moon's dream of world unification the movement also acquired substantial real estate holdings, most particularly in South Korea and Brazil. His abiding interest in the sea led him to establish several fishing ventures. Indeed, one of these companies, True World Foods, is the largest supplier of sushi seafood in the United States. According to one report, 75 percent of American sushi bars purchase their raw product from Moon's company (Kessler 2006).

Of all Unificationist business enterprises, however, media holdings are arguably the most visible, and the movement has continued to establish or acquire new media organizations around the world, all of which are used to convey the Unificationist worldview. Now quite influential among American political conservatives, the flagship of Unificationist media is certainly the *Washington Times*, although in 2000 Newsworld Communications, which publishes the *Washington Times*, purchased the venerable wire service, United Press International. From a Unificationist perspective, there is considerably

more to these widely varied business interests than simply profits. They serve as the fundamental economic platform for the Unificationist mission of world Restoration with Moon as the new Messiah. That said, the *Washington Times* has never been financially stable, recording losses each year since its inception. Indeed, it has been estimated that Moon subsidized the newspaper to the tune of two billion dollars. In the face of this, in 2010 the *Washington Times* was offered for sale, though subsequently repurchased by Moon with promises of reversing the paper's declining fortunes.

An equally diverse array of not-for-profit outreach organizations contribute to Moon's vision of world restoration and unification. For most of the movement's history, these groups have been organized directly under the aegis of the Unification Church, but in 1994 a new umbrella organization was formed – The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, with Hak Ja Han Moon as President.

Joining the Unification Church means that a convert recognizes Moon's messianic status, agrees to contribute to the payment of personal indemnity for human sinfulness, and looks forward to receiving the marital Blessing and building a restored world of sinless families. Like many other new religious movements, in the early 1970s Unificationists were most successful in recruiting young adults disillusioned by the crumbling counterculture of the 1960s. First encounters with the movement were often highly emotional. Its sense of purpose and dedication to the quest for a better world appealed to potential converts, and the solid framework of moral boundaries created a sense of personal safety (cf. Bromley and Shupe 1979; Barker 1984). Through most of the 1970s, Unificationists lived communally, devoting all their time and energy to paying indemnity and advancing the cause of Restoration. They were responsible for their own spiritual condition, and believed that their standing in the spirit world after death was determined by the progress they made in this life.

During this period of Unificationist history, the two most prominent activities for members were *recruitment*, which the movement defines as producing "spiritual children," and *fundraising*, which members understand as the legitimate transfer of money from the sinful, satanic domain to God's sinless estate. Highly mobile, communally organized recruitment and fundraising teams traveled the country, frequenting airports and shopping malls in search of converts and donations. Many Unificationists believe that a person benefits from "transferring" money to God's domain, whether those who donate realize the spiritual implications of the act or not. This led to the practice of "heavenly deception" among some fundraising teams – essentially defrauding potential donors on the grounds that

they would still reap heavenly rewards. Both recruitment and fundraising were highly ritualized activities in which members tested their spiritual capacity to offer love in the face of hostility, to inspire others with compassion, and to present as many people as possible with the opportunity to participate in the Restoration. As one member noted, "Fundraising is probably the most amazing way to know God. It is not salesmanship or personality that brings in contributions – it is God" (Bromley and Shupe 1980: 232). During these recruitment and fundraising drives, members often set a variety of disciplinary conditions for themselves in order to demonstrate God's power in their lives.

In the late 1970s, the Unification Church moved away from a communal organization to a more decentralized and settled family structure. Members were encouraged to leave church-organized communities and live in single-family homes, known as "Home-Churches." Theologically, in this development the family became the church, and the church the family. Each Home-Church was expected to assume responsibility for 360 families in their community, serving both their spiritual and physical needs. Although most of the members Blessed during the 1980s participated in this more settled lifestyle, many left full-time status in the Church and became "associate members," maintaining private homes, traditional careers, and participating in Church activities on a more voluntary basis.

Brainwashing, Deprogramming, and the Unification Church

Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, and the channeled messages of Ramtha all teach that humanity is essentially good and that our principal task is to recover the reality of that forgotten virtue. Although the Unification Church envisions the unseen order in terms of a more traditional Christian *Heilsgeschichte*, a "salvation-history" that encompasses Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, the concept of recovering a forgotten or lost perfection is still paramount.

For Unificationists, the divinely ordained order for humankind began in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were meant to learn to love God as his children. Giving birth to the original human family, which would be entirely centered on God, men and women would live forever in paradise, eternally engaged in a loving relationship with their creator. However, Satan's jealousy and Eve's spiritual seduction overturned God's original plan and from that moment humankind traced its lineage to Satan rather than God. Cut off from their original purpose,

divided into warring camps, and living corrupt, impure lives, humans have lost touch both with their true identities as God's children and with an understanding of how they might restore themselves to God's original purpose for them.

In the Unification Church, however, a new opportunity for humanity's restoration has now presented itself: recognizing and accepting Sun Myung Moon as the Messiah, the Lord of the Second Advent, and supporting his plan for world unification. While there are many dimensions to the Unificationist program, the single most important is recreating a God-centered lineage for humanity. In his role as the messianic parent-figure, Moon blessed couples in marriage and thereby regenerates this spiritually perfect, God-centered lineage.

Arriving in the United States in 1972 and beginning his messianic mission, Moon's main objectives were to rescue individuals from satanic dominion by bringing them into the Unificationist Movement, and work toward world restoration through the formation of spiritually perfect families. Drawing on the countercultural population of the period, for a time the movement was able to attract converts to his idealistic quest. However, it was the occasionally rapid conversion of these youth (who often had shown no previous religious inclinations), combined with the rejection of their former lives (including their own families), that triggered the intense controversy that enveloped the movement during that decade. In essence, while the Unification Church provided sacred legitimation for countercultural protest, aggrieved families responded by demonizing the movement and its leader and demanding that something be done about what they considered a clear and present social danger.

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, throughout the 1970s and 1980s Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church were regularly accused of "brainwashing" converts, of imposing a regime of thought control and behavior modification that rendered members of the movement incapable of independent reason or action. The charges were based on the "brainwashing" metaphor that was used to explain the behavior of soldiers returning from captivity following the Korean War and of inmates in Chinese re-education camps following the communist revolution (Sargent 1957; Lifton 1961). In the context of new religions, this was exacerbated both by sensationalized accounts in the popular press (e.g., Conway and Siegelman 1979; Freed 1980) and by the apostate testimony of former members (Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia 1983). In many ways, the Unification Church became the flashpoint for wider social tensions over the emergence of new religious movements, as well as larger cultural

debates over how adherents come to join them, and what if anything should be done about it.

The brainwashing theory deployed by the secular anticult movement became a kind of cultural mythology, an overarching explanatory framework both for the explosive emergence of new religions toward the end of the 1960s and for the alleged success these groups had in recruiting members. This latter fear was reinforced by the inflated membership numbers that groups themselves often reported as a way of legitimating their religious authenticity. While social scientists have determined that none of the groups that triggered the brainwashing panic reached a full-time North American membership of more than 10,000, the impression created by the anticult movement, the media, and, ironically, the groups themselves was that this number was hundreds of times higher – and the danger, therefore, that much greater.

By locating the process of conversion in an external mechanism – whether brainwashing, or, as it is often called now, thought reform or coercive persuasion – proponents of the theory created the three pillars on which the anticult movement rests. First, the theory effectively obviated claims made by new religious adherents that their conversions were voluntary and genuine, and that they were truly happy in their new lives. Since they had been brainwashed, the anticult logic runs, members of groups such as the Unification Church were not in a position to know whether they had made the choice intentionally or not. Second, the brainwashing hypothesis summarily removed responsibility for conversion from the individual and placed it squarely in the domain of "devious cult leaders." That is, because they had not made the choice of their own free will, conversion was a function of group manipulation, leadership charisma, and the coercive tactics used to recruit members. Third, absent the individual responsibility of the adherent, the brainwashing theory laid the conceptual foundation for parents to seek legal custody over their adult children by having them declared incompetent, and then to employ techniques of coercive deprogramming in an effort to "rescue" them, effectively, from themselves.

Indeed, the remedy to which many parents turned was a process called "deprogramming," the forcible removal, confinement, and "counter-conversion" (LeMoult 1983: 238) of new religious adherents. Begun in the early 1970s as an ad hoc response to the Children of God (now The Family International), deprogramming quickly systematized into one of the principal means by which the anticult movement chose to confront the new religions. As sociologists Anson Shupe and David Bromley note,

the concept of deprogramming encompasses a variety of processes, ranging "from the spectacular public kidnappings, forcible detentions, and exorcism-like rituals believed by deprogrammers to break 'cult'-imposed mind control to quiet re-evaluation by a convert (together with, perhaps, family, clergy, or friends) of the full implications of his or her chosen conversion course" (1980: 145). As another commentator has pointed out, however, deprogramming was often "far more like 'brainwashing' than the conversion process by which members join various sects. The restraint, deprivation of sleep, constant talk, denunciation, alternation of tough and easy talk, emotional appeals, and incessant questioning finally cause a break in the will, giving the deprogrammers a certain power over the victim" (LeMoult 1983: 239).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of so-called "cult bills" were introduced in state legislatures across the United States, and, while some won a measure of early support, none was ultimately enacted into law. For example, the draft bill to amend the mental hygiene law in New York state proposed that conservatorship could be granted if a person showed evidence of, among numerous other things, a "sudden and dramatic personality change." This was marked by such indicators as "lack of appropriate emotional response," "wooden, mask-like expression," and/or "weight change" (see Shupe and Bromley 1980: 130–134). How these were determined, obviously, and who made those determinations were just two of the problems with such bills. Deprogramming gradually diminished, at least in the North American context, as victims of the practice brought suits against their deprogrammers. Indeed, such a suit resulted in the 1996 bankruptcy of the Cult Awareness Network, arguably the largest, best known of the agencies that supported coercive deprogramming. A Washington state court awarded Jason Scott, a member of a United Pentecostal congregation, four million dollars in punitive damages against the Cult Awareness Network and three deprogrammers referred by the organization.

The obvious problems with deprogramming aside, the brainwashing theory itself has a number of harsh realities to overcome. First, if the techniques of brainwashing are as indiscriminately effective as anticult activists alleged, then they should have worked regardless of who they were used on, where, or when. The evidence indicates, however, that new religions in the late 1960s through to the late 1970s were most successful in recruiting young people, and only then during the countercultural movement of the time. Once the counterculture dissipated, recruitment rates dropped dramatically. Second, in order to work effectively, the process of brainwashing presumably requires a certain amount of training

and expertise. Of the many new religions accused of brainwashing, though, the reality is that recruitment efforts were largely the responsibility of the newest, least experienced members of the group – who were also the least effective ambassadors for the movement. Moreover, if these groups were employing the brainwashing tactics attributed to them, it is reasonable to assume that they would refine their technique and improve their results over time. Such was not the case. And, finally, in what is arguably the most damning indictment of the brainwashing theory, despite their best efforts and often aggressive recruiting tactics, new religions overall were largely unsuccessful in attracting and retaining significant numbers of adherents. Put succinctly, there is little empirical evidence that brainwashing, however employed, was at all successful as anything other than a prop to the secular anticult movement.

Although there are some scholars and members of the anticult movement who still hold to one variant of the brainwashing hypothesis or another (see Singer and Lalich 1995; Zablocki and Robbins 2001), and while coercive deprogramming has been replaced by less aggressive (though still problematic) "exit counseling" in many of the countries where it took root in the 1970s and 1980s (with Japan, however, a notable exception), it still affects the perception of, and therefore the fortunes of the Unification Church and other new religious movements (see Shupe and Darnell 2006). In Russia, for example, where the Church was incorporated in 1992, it has faced continual pressure by anticult groups such as the Committee for the Protection of Family and Personality and the Inter-Regional Committee for Salvage from Totalitarian Sects – both of which are heavily influenced by the ideology of the North American anticult movement (Krylova n.d.). In 1996, French MP Jacques Guyard presented *Les Sectes en France*, a lengthy parliamentary report that listed 172 religious groups as "dangerous sects," and in 1997 the French government established L'Observatoire Inter-ministériel sur les Sectes (the Joint Bureau on Cults) to coordinate surveillance of suspect groups; this list features the Unification Church prominently.

Researching the Unification Church

London School of Economics sociologist Eileen Barker conducted the most thorough investigation into the question of brainwashing and the Unification Church in the late 1970s and her research, which was published

in 1984, remains the definitive work on the early life of the group. More than that, though, it serves also as a model for conducting sociological research on new religions and demonstrates how academic research can impact public perception and social policy.

Using questionnaires, structured interviews, and participant observation carried out over a six-year period, Barker determined that the retention rate among new recruits was abysmally low. Of those who attended the Unification Church's two-day introductory workshop in 1979, only 30 percent chose to attend the more intensive seven-day experience, while only 10 percent actually joined the Church and remained for more than one week. After two years, only 5 percent were still affiliated with the Church in any capacity (Barker 1984: 121–148).

Three aspects of Barker's work are particularly important methodologically. First, she set out to test a particular hypothesis. She wanted to know (i) whether recruiting and affiliation processes in the Unification Church either resembled or rose to the level of anticult alarmism over brainwashing, and (ii) if they did not, how effective were the actual recruitment practices the Church did use. Put simply, does brainwashing exist? Narrowing the focus of one's research and answering specific questions are two of the most effective ways to understand new religious movements.

Second, Barker secured relatively unrestricted access to the group itself. This is particularly important since most of the information available at the time was based either on media reports or countermovement propaganda, the one often informing and reinforcing the other (see Cowan 2003a). Since much of what the public understood about new religions came from ex-Moonies and angry family members, Barker knew she had to investigate the other side of the problem. Rather than base her research on second-hand reports from biased sources, she went to the horse's mouth, as it were. This is not to say that members, especially movement leaders, would not try to influence her work, but part of good sociological research is first-hand experience with the group itself.

Third, Barker operationalized her research plan in a way that would answer the questions she set. This required a longitudinal approach. She could not simply take a "snapshot" of the group over the course of a week or two. By following the long-term affiliation careers of members and potential members – especially the large numbers of people who demonstrated initial interest in the Unification Church, but went no further – Barker was able to demonstrate the fallacious nature of anticult claims about brainwashing.

Further Reading on the Unification Church

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Chapter 6

The Children of God/The Family International: The Issue of Sexuality

> *THE ONLY LOVE OF GOD THEY CAN SEE IS THE LOVE THEY SEE IN YOU. IF THEY HAVE TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOU FIRST before they find out it's the Lord, it's just God's bait to hook them! You have to Love them, Honey. You have to love them with all your heart and with all your soul and thy neighbor as thyself.*
>
> Moses David Berg, "Flirty Little Fishy"

Throughout the 1990s, the Children of God, now known as The Family International, feared the sound of boots on the porch in the middle of the night and the harsh flare of police lights across their windows as they slept. And with good reason. Because of prosecution (and some would argue persecution) by authorities in several countries, each Family member was expected to maintain a "flee bag," a suitcase or backpack filled with essentials and ready to hand should members have to abandon their communal homes on short notice. In July 1990, for example, police in Barcelona, Spain, raided two Family homes, taking 22 children into "protective custody" and charging 10 adults with "abducting minors and unlawful proselytism" (Reuters 1990). Two years later, in the largest operation of its kind Australia had ever seen, police and child protection workers coordinated pre-dawn raids on eight Family homes in Sydney and Melbourne. As adult members of the community "held hands and sang," buses took more than 140 children from their parents and guardians and transported them to "secret accommodation centers." Arguing that the children had been "kidnapped by the law," the group's solicitor called the raids "fascist lunacy" (Humphreys 1992). In similar efforts, French police raided Family homes

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near Lyons and Aix-en-Provence in June 1993, also seizing 140 children and arresting more than 50 adults (Reuters 1993). Accused of brainwashing converts and sexual abuse of children, The Family had been banned in France since the late 1970s, something which may help explain the violence of the raids that was reported by many of the victims. "It sounded like some insane killers were breaking everything and killing everybody!" said one Family member, who "hid in a closet with her baby girl and four small sons" (Bainbridge 2002: 12). Finally, in one of the most highly reported cases of state intervention, nearly 200 Argentine police officers raided 10 Family homes in and around Buenos Aires, taking nearly 300 children into protective custody and arresting 30 adults on charges of "conspiracy to kidnap children" (Bennett 1993; Nash 1993). Victims describe the raids in horrific terms. "My first impression was that terrorists or robbers were storming the house," reports one member (Bainbridge 2002: 10). The case made headlines around the world.

Following a pattern that has consistently marked their treatment of new religious movements (cf. Wright 1997; Cowan and Hadden 2004; and the following chapter in this volume), mass media inevitably portrayed The Family in the worst possible light, frequently referring to the group as a "sex cult" and initially lauding government actions as "rescuing" children, "saving" them, or taking children into "protective custody." It is important to point out, however, that in all cases the children were returned to their parents or legal guardians – though not without often lengthy and costly legal battles – and all charges against adult Family members were subsequently dropped. Indeed, the Argentine judge who ordered the raids was eventually removed from the case, when an appeal court in the case ruled that he had no jurisdiction to order the raids (Katz 1994).

The Family is one of the most successful of the numerous "Jesus Movements" that emerged from the counterculture of the 1960s, and remains one of the best known. Founded by David Brandt Berg (1919–94) and called by a variety of names, including Teens for Christ, Revolutionaries for Jesus, the Children of God, the Family of Love, and the Fellowship of Independent Missionary Communities, The Family defines its primary mission as evangelism – bringing to a spiritually fallen world the message of salvation through acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal lord and savior. In this, it is not so very different from thousands of other evangelical Protestant churches and para-church groups. Organized principally into a network of communal homes and operating in more than 100 countries, The Family is an international movement that claims approximately 9000 full-time members and several tens of thousands of affiliate members.

Family literature, the sale of which was once a significant source of income for the group, is published in over 60 languages, and The Family reports that ten million tapes and nearly one billion pieces of literature have been distributed worldwide (Van Zandt 1991: 115–116). Although it has gone by different names in its history – Children of God (1968), Family of Love (1978), The Family (1991) – for consistency we will refer to the group throughout this chapter as either the Children of God or The Family, the names by which they are best known to wider society.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of The Family is the incessant change that has marked virtually every aspect of its lifestyle. While it considers itself an evangelical Christian movement, both Berg's claim to be God's Endtime Prophet and many of the revelations he claimed to receive place the group well outside the Christian mainstream, both socially and theologically. Of all the innovations generated by these revelations, though, The Family's experimentation with revolutionary sexual practices has impacted its public image most profoundly and produced a troubled legacy with which the movement continues to struggle.

Mo: David Berg and the Origins of the Children of God

David Brandt Berg, who was known variously as "Moses David," "Uncle Dave," "Father Dave," "Mo," and "Dad" by Family members, was born David Brandt Berg. Although born in California, Berg was raised in and around Florida, where his parents were itinerant though well-known evangelists associated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. By his own account, Berg himself began developing spiritual abilities early in life, receiving the charismatic gifts of discernment, wisdom, knowledge, and faith by the age of 19, and the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and spiritual foreknowledge a few years later (Millikan 1994: 198). In 1944, following military service as a conscientious objector during World War II – during which he claimed he was miraculously cured of pneumonia – Berg married Jane Miller (1922–2011), who became known to the movement as Mother Eve.

In the late 1940s, Berg served briefly as a minister in the Christian and Missionary Alliance, though conflicts with church officials led to his dismissal in fairly short order. In 1954, while working as a schoolteacher, he met Fred Jordan, who operated the American Soul Clinic, a Los Angeles-based missionary organization. This meeting would change the direction of Berg's life. Berg worked briefly for Jordan, then

returned to Florida to lead his own Soul Clinic. In Miami, however, he quickly came to the attention of church authorities for his aggressive and antagonistic missionary tactics. Staging what he called "commando raids" on local congregations, for example, Soul Clinic members distributed evangelistic literature in church parking lots and interrupted worship services to preach their own idiosyncratic form of the gospel message.

Although Berg claimed to have already received several divine prophecies by that point, a 1961 message led him in an even more radical direction. Not unlike the message Joseph Smith claimed to have received from God while praying in the woods, "The Message of Jeremiah," which Berg later proclaimed as "The Message that Started the Jesus Revolution," convinced him that all of the established Christian churches had forsaken God, and that he had been appointed "to destroy the System! – This present false System of religion" (Berg 1968: ¶45). For the next several years, Berg and his followers traveled across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, preaching, singing, and evangelizing, eventually arriving at his mother's home in Huntington Beach, California.

Two years earlier, his mother had received a prophecy warning that the world was moving into the Endtimes, the penultimate period in human history that immediately precedes the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a time marked by increasing apostasy and social unrest. During the 1960s the Huntington Beach area south of Los Angeles was a magnet for the 1960s counterculture, and Berg and his followers began witnessing to the thousands of hippies who flocked there. Operating out of the Light Club coffeehouse, an outreach ministry of the famous Teen Challenge organization, Berg formed a singing group known as "Teens for Christ," which became a major vehicle for recruitment.

Known by then as "Uncle Dave," Berg preached an anti-establishment message that resonated powerfully with the counterculture: the "System" was hopelessly corrupt and its destruction was imminent. Jesus was the only true revolutionary, and the Bible the only true textbook for spiritual revolution. As "Revolutionaries for Jesus," the Teens for Christ continued their practice of guerrilla evangelism by disrupting church worship services and reading aloud passages from the book of Jeremiah that members believed prophesied doom and destruction for a spiritually bereft America (Wallis 1981: 100). Not surprisingly, their aggressive witnessing tactics inevitably brought the group into conflict with authorities, both ecclesial and legal (Enroth 1972: 19–24; Wangerin 1993: 20–21).

Undaunted by criticism or resistance, Berg encouraged potential converts to commit themselves entirely to Christ – abandoning their worldly possessions, giving up alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, abstaining from sex, and joining his household. In response to growing hostility in California, and an expectation among the group of the state's imminent destruction, Berg took his Teens for Christ on the road, witnessing, evangelizing, and holding "sackcloth vigils" for the fallen state of the nation. Though the spartan living conditions and itinerant lifestyle led to numerous defections, the movement continued to gain new members. One of these was Karen Zerby (b.1946), a slender, attractive Pentecostal who would be instrumental in the development of The Family.

By this time, journalists had dubbed the group the "Children of God," a name The Family adopted for a decade. Members assumed biblical names, and Berg, who now went by Moses David and was regarded as God's Endtime Prophet, began to issue the "Mo Letters," his principal means of communication with the rapidly growing movement. On August 26, 1969, the first Mo Letter announced a pivotal change in the Children of God: the "Old Love, New Love" prophecy. Written in language reminiscent of the King James Bible, the only version acceptable to The Family, the "Old Love, New Love" prophecy established two significant directions for the group. First, it announced that God had forsworn the established Christian church because it had rejected the call to repentance and commitment preached by Berg and his followers. The opening paragraphs read:

> **IT IS HER PRIDE THAT DOTH RESIST THEE** and thou dost provoke her to jealousy by thy good works. Thou dost embarrass her for her failures and she fears the opinions of men. Therefore she doth reject thee. In rejecting **thee** she doth reject **Me.** Her house is left unto her utterly desolate. Therefore, she doth attack thee in fury and attempt to cast thee forth.
>
> **BUT IN SO DOING SHE SHALL ALSO CAST ME FORTH.** And she shall be left alone and desolate as those things that she honoured most, her buildings and her ceremonies. (Berg 1969: ¶¶1–2; all emphases in the original)

In place of the old church, the prophecy continued, God would raise and bless a new church, a faithful church, a church embodied in the Children of God led by Moses David.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, Berg used the latter paragraphs of the prophecy to announce that he was ending his 25-year marriage to Mother Eve, who was now meant to symbolize the old church system. "**THEREFORE HATH THY MOTHER ALREADY DEPARTED**," he wrote, "lo, these many years, for I was gone from her and she sought Me not" (Berg 1969: ¶31). The cover of the initial Mo Letter, drawn in comic book style, depicted a young, beautiful woman, smiling and inviting, though dressed in rags, stepping out in front of an elderly, angry-looking woman dressed in the caricatured robes of a Catholic archbishop. Karen Zerby, who was known by this time as "Maria," represented the new church system embodied in the Children of God. With her, Berg formed a relationship that lasted until his death in 1994.

By 1970, Berg was withdrawing from day-to-day leadership of the movement. In late December of that year, he announced his final decision to the Children of God in a two-part letter, "I Gotta Split," a revelation that formalized his decision to live in personal seclusion:

> I saw myself in a vision seated at a table with pen in hand. It was one of those ancient quill pens – you know the type – like a feather or a plume from some bird, such as you've seen in the pictures of ancient prophets, and, as I was writing on the table before me, from my pen there shone rays of light in several directions. ANYHOW, FIVE RAYS OF LIGHT WERE FLOWING FROM MY PEN TO YOU – one ray toward each destination! (Berg 1970: ¶¶4–5)

Berg constantly encouraged his followers to expand the movement beyond the United States, and by this time many members had relocated to Europe. In 1971, Berg and Maria moved to London and no members outside his inner circle ever saw him again. In fact, most Family members never met Berg personally, and because of fears for his safety even pictures of him in situ were extremely rare. Until his death, however, he continued to guide the movement through his inner circle of disciples and through revelations he communicated to his followers in a steady stream of Mo Letters. These revelations continually redirected members' missionary efforts and occasionally restructured the movement. Indeed, two of the most striking features of The Family have been its constant change, and the ability of a second (and now third) generation of members to transition toward a more conventional form of religious organization.

Social Organization of the Children of God/The Family

In contrast to many other new religious movements, The Family's organizational structure is quite simple. The basic organizational unit has always been communal living in Family homes. Functioning as the movement's residential, evangelistic, economic, and socialization bases, these were initially called "colonies" and only later, "homes." When the membership was still relatively small, Berg invited disciples to live in his own home and to call him "Father David" or "Dad." As the movement developed and Berg withdrew from direct organizational leadership, The Family expanded into an international network of communal homes. Indeed, by 1972, Berg claimed over 100 homes in 40 nations. Currently, the group claims more than a thousand communities in more than 90 countries.

Berg was 50 years old when his ragtag group of followers formed into a coherent movement. Though he continued to lead The Family for nearly 20 years, he was helped by a small, dedicated inner circle, consisting of Maria, his children and their spouses, plus a few other trusted disciples. The leadership remained relatively stable until the late 1970s, when Berg became disillusioned with the authoritarian manner in which some in his inner circle led the movement and their increasing resistance to his own charismatic authority (Wallis 1981: 89–102). At one point, he ousted virtually the entire leadership, sending them out into the field to missionize. Numerous members, including Berg's daughter, her current and former husbands, and two long-time disciples, left the movement. A decade later, Berg shifted the leadership again. Approaching 70 years of age by this time and in increasingly fragile health, he turned over administration of The Family to Maria and two favorite disciples, Apollos and Peter Amsterdam. When Berg died in 1994, leadership passed to Maria and Peter, who, with Berg's blessing, had established an intimate relationship two decades earlier, and who were married a short time after Berg's death. Although they occasionally meet with disciples and outsiders, Maria and Peter have continued Berg's secluded, high-security lifestyle.

Throughout its history, and though its members are often separated by tens of thousands of miles, The Family considers itself a single entity, a single family, and members speak of their primary commitment as being "married to the Family." In a 1978 "Disciples Only" letter entitled "Happy Rebirthday," for example, which established far-reaching principles of reorganization for the movement, Berg wrote to his followers that "**MARRIAGE IN THE FAMILY** is to Jesus … And we are all married to

each other in His love" (1978a). The far-flung network of Family homes, however, has also been held together by the mobility of its membership, a clear division of labor among the different homes, and, of course, the Mo Letters.

Not unlike Sun Myung and Hak Ja Han Moon, Berg and Maria assumed the roles of "Dad and Mama" in the single family that was the movement. Berg's children, their spouses, and a few chosen disciples constituted the Royal Family, and, to avoid potential problems of divided loyalty, members practiced exclusively endogamous marriage arrangements. Sexual sharing among both married and single Family members established the group itself as the basic unit of membership rather than the nuclear family. Though it seems reasonable that geographic stability would contribute to solidarity within a new religious group, in The Family this stability has been achieved at least partially through its highly mobile character, and the willingness of members to move from place to place in response to the call of the leadership, the perceived needs of the movement, and the evangelistic potential of the new mission field. Since homes and members are constantly shifting geographically, the most significant sense of stability for group members is their connection to the larger movement.

The homes themselves are networked together through a clear division of labor. Initially, Berg organized the movement into "tribes," each named for one of the tribes of Israel and each with a particular role in the movement. Levi, for example, was the tribe of teachers, Issachar the tribe of mechanics, Zebulon of farmers, and Dan the tribe responsible for communications. Today, there are homes whose principal responsibility is witnessing, while others provide child-rearing and educational services. Some homes are charged with administering the organizational structure of The Family, and others concentrate on the production of movement literature and music.

Given the far-flung, international network of homes, Family literature was one of the principal means by which a common movement culture was maintained, and access to that literature served as the ultimate legitimation of membership status and authorization for group activities. These voluminous letters, communiqués, directives, and literary miscellany contain advice on handling issues ranging from witnessing strategies to childhood education, news on movement activities around the world, commentary on current events from the perspective of Family theology, and statistics and stories on Family successes in pursuing its salvationist agenda. They are also the principal means by which prophecy and revelation have been communicated. Since these revelations can

dramatically alter movement priorities and positions – and have done so at a number of points in its history – the importance of Family literature as a mechanism of integration, legitimation, and social control cannot be overemphasized. To sanction disobedient members or homes, for example, movement leaders often restricted or denied access to certain kinds of literature. In a 1978 "Disciples Only" letter, for example, entitled "Our New Colony Rules Summarized," Berg began: "I cannot force you to obey, but I hold a few trump cards – and those are the Lord's letters, which we shall withhold from those who refuse to cooperate, and from which we shall excommunicate you if you don't obey and forsake all to follow Jesus" (1978b: ¶1). It is difficult to overstate the fear many Family members felt over the prospect of being excluded from Berg's literary presence.

Over the past three decades, one of the most persistent features of Family life has been the striking changes in both social organization and movement goals, changes Berg referred to as *revolutions*. While organizational shifts of this kind are not uncommon in new religious movements, in The Family they were particularly dramatic and far-reaching. Though often initiated as a result of specific prophecies received by Berg, they were also the product of his administrative authority and overall vision for the movement and they had profound consequences.

By the mid 1970s, Berg was concerned about declining recruitment, inadequately trained leadership, and resistance to his charismatic authority (Davis and Richardson 1976: 326–327; Wallis 1981: 108–117). Beginning in 1974, though instituted officially in 1975, the *New Revolution* sought to reduce the size of group homes (what Berg called "The Blob War" [1974a]), to encourage more members to engage in "flirty fishing" (see below), and to sanction group leaders who were adding their own interpretation to the Mo Letters and teaching doctrines that differed from his pronouncements.

When the New Revolution failed to achieve the desired effect, in 1978 Berg instituted one of the most massive reorganizations in the movement's history – the Reorganization National Revolution. Essentially, he abolished the Children of God, and put in its place the Family of Love. This once again reduced the size of the homes, swept away most of the bureaucracy that had grown up between Berg and the local groups, and directed that home leaders be elected by the membership but answer directly (and solely) to him. Since the movement had expanded internationally, Berg also called on American home leaders outside the United States to step down in favor of indigenous leadership. To avoid creating (or perpetuating) another religio-colonial empire in which Christianity was associated with

American evangelicalism, Berg also encouraged members to adopt the language and customs of the cultures in which they lived.

Following the mass suicide/murders among Peoples Temple in 1978, and anticipating government repression of religious movements like The Family, Berg also launched the Nationalize Reorganize Security-wise Revolution, and urged members as much as possible to operate below the social radar. Don't attract attention, became the order of the day. Homes diminished in size; witnessing stalled and recruitment plummeted; the network that Berg had so carefully established among the homes was shattered. The Mo Letters remained the only stable connection throughout the movement. By 1980, the Children of God had shrunk to about 8000 members living in approximately 2000 homes, most of which, for all intents and purposes, had lost contact with one another. To address this obvious fragmentation, which if it continued would mean the end of the movement entirely, Berg launched the Fellowship Revolution, re-establishing regional and continental levels of leadership and creating larger homes ("combos") that served as national headquarters. Though home size increased once again, perhaps the most significant element of this revolution was Berg's insistence that members move to developing countries, both to avoid what Berg believed was an impending nuclear war and to spread the movement's message worldwide before the coming apocalypse.

The year 1995 marked yet another revolution, when the *Charter of Rights and Responsibilities* was adopted the year following Berg's death. Also known as *The Love Charter* or simply *The Charter*, this document affirmed Family doctrine and spelled out in detail the rules for daily communal life. Once again, though, the *Love Charter* reversed course for the movement, promoting smaller homes and more democratic local and regional governance.

While The Family International has a longstanding history of rapid and dramatic change, the most recent changes in the movement are breathtaking in their scope and impact. In 2010, The Family announced *The Reboot*. Taken together, the changes in the Reboot literally constitute another revolution, or perhaps counterrevolution, in a group that was already revolutionary. According to Family leaders, factors precipitating the latest transformation are quite familiar to new religions scholars. The counterculture that was the primary recruiting ground for many late twentieth-century new religious groups died out long ago, leaving the movement with an aging first generation, a less-committed and more individualistically inclined second generation, declining membership, diminished relevance, and an uncertain future. In the face of these

developments, The Family opted to abandon its "world-rejecting" stance for a more "world-engaging" philosophy.

Most significantly, the Reboot has transformed The Family's theological doctrines, social organization, and its relationship to conventional society. Indeed, in a manner not unlike the changes in Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God (see Tkach 1997), The Family has made a sharp turn toward mainstream Protestant evangelicalism. The Bible, for example, is now deemed the ultimate doctrinal authority, while movement texts, including David Berg's prophetic writings, Mo Letters, and organizational directives have been redefined as "inspirational writings" or "additional teachings." That is, they are no longer considered scripture and their power over members has been diminished.

The standing of the spiritual revelations that Berg and other members received, and which formed the basis for The Family's mission, have been redefined accordingly. Family leaders now assert that prophecy is not infallible, but must be understood in terms of both local and global context. Messages have different meanings and significance in different times and circumstances, and those received earlier in the movement's history must now be reinterpreted in terms of the present situation. Just as Family doctrines have moved in a more conventional direction, so has its organization. The tight communal organization and forsake-all discipleship that were hallmarks of The Family for over 40 years have been abandoned in favor of fewer membership requirements and greater individualism. Members may now send their children to conventional schools. They may own property and pursue secular careers. The biting criticism of established Christian churches as "churchianity" – the hallmark of The Family for decades – has been dropped. Even the radical sexual practices, which made The Family an infamous household name, have been renounced. Having discarded most of its most notable characteristics, The Family is now scarcely recognizable and awaits the crafting of a new identity and mission.

Beliefs, Rituals, and Practices of the Children of God/The Family

True to its roots, The Family has always accepted a number of the basic tenets of evangelical Christianity – a Triune God who created the universe, the world, and humanity in six literal days; the fall of humanity as a result of temptation by Satan; substitutionary atonement offered by a sinless Christ; and the requirement for conversion and regeneration through the

acceptance of Jesus as one's personal lord and savior. Like many evangelicals they believe in the reality of spiritual warfare, and that Satan is assisted in his ongoing battle with God by a host of demonic spirits (see Chryssides 1999). God allows satanic activity as a way to warn the unwary and to punish the evil and the unfaithful – both of which provide The Family with plausible explanations for illness, failure, conflict, and persecution. Unlike mainstream evangelicals, however, Berg also taught that the Holy Spirit is the female aspect of the Godhead. Much of Family literature is illustrated in a 1970s comic book style (some of which Berg even called "True Komix") and draws explicitly on the fantasy artwork of artists such as Boris Vallejo, Rowena Merrill, and Luis Royo. In these publications, the Holy Spirit is often portrayed as a beautiful, alluring, and scantily clad young woman (Millikan 1994: 199). We will consider this more fully below.

Rather than the Word of God delivered once for all, Berg preached a progressive revelation through which God continues to guide humankind as history plays itself out in the Endtimes. As God's Endtime Prophet, Berg's revelations often came in the form of dreams and visions, some of which even occurred during sexual intercourse (Van Zandt 1991: 21). For Family members prior to the Reboot in 2010, these revelations offer more insight into God's will for the present time than did the Bible. Thus, for most of The Family's history, the "Word" consisted of both the Bible and Berg's revelations, though greater emphasis was placed on the latter.

Like many evangelical Christians, Family members believe that the end of days is imminent and will likely occur within their lifetimes (Bainbridge 2002: 60). In addition to what they regarded as humanity's increasing moral depravity, other signs clearly point to the approaching apocalypse. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, and reflecting the Cold War mentality of many evangelical Protestants, The Family viewed the "godless communism" in the former Soviet Union as part of "the Devil's own damnable deceitful system for the doomed" (Berg 1973: ¶103). Some of Berg's most blistering attacks, however, were reserved for the United States, which he considered the Whore of Babylon described in the book of Revelation (17: 4–6). He railed against all established institutions – political, economic, educational, and familial – but held special contempt for what he considered lukewarm Christian churches, churches that had sold out to the "system" and grown into "the false cult of churchianity" (Berg 1984: ¶2). Although the broad outlines of Family eschatology do not differ significantly from those posited by other conservative Christians, in Berg's version The Family would play a decisive role in facilitating the Endtimes and would occupy a central position in millennial governance once the Second Coming has occurred.

In contrast to the broad sweep and universal significance of eschatology, for most of its history daily observances in Family homes have tended to be relatively simple and informal (Chancellor 2000: 151–152). Each morning members gather for a group devotional hour that includes spontaneous prayer, singing Christian hymns and Family songs, "Word time" (readings from the Bible, the Mo Letters, or other Family literature), and general discussion of the readings. More prayer and singing conclude the service. Personal devotions – individual prayer and Word time – occur throughout the day, and Family members seek divine guidance and blessing before every major decision, activity, or event. Indeed, when sociologist William Sims Bainbridge looked at the devotional habits of Family members, he found that they prayed four times more often than the United States average, and more than 80 percent of them read the Bible at least daily (2002: 70, 74). While there is little formal ritual in daily Family life, until the Reboot relationships with non-Family members were often highly ritualized and conformed to a very limited set of concerns, principally "provisioning" and "witnessing."

Provisioning served to meet The Family's economic and material needs in the context of their rather itinerant lifestyle. Since, as far as they were able, Family members tried to maintain distance from conventional society, until the 2010 Reboot they did not seek traditional forms of employment. Instead, they supported themselves through a system of donations. Provisioning was, in fact, a form of solicitation, in which Family members approached people they thought might be able to help them, identified themselves as Christian missionaries, and requested whatever assistance was required and available – food, clothing, lodging, travel tickets, and so forth. In restaurants, Family members offered to provide musical entertainment in return for help. The provisioning system presented a number of advantages for The Family. They required very little actual money; they did not have to compromise with "the System;" and, not unlike the fundraising efforts of Unificationists, they believed that they were recycling Satan's material resources in the service of God. Since provisioning success was not a function of personal persuasiveness, but a measure of one's faith in God, members believed that they would be rewarded with donations to the extent that their intentions and actions accorded with the divine mandate.

By far the most important Family activity was and is evangelism, spreading the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Throughout the Family's history, members have always considered this their primary personal responsibility. Because they believe they are preparing the way

for the return of Christ, witnessing is critical to the Family's mission and self-understanding, and operates in two dimensions: saving individuals from the suffering and destruction that they believe is inevitable in the coming apocalypse, and recruiting members to God's Endtime Army, yet another name for the movement. By its own estimate, The Family has witnessed to more than 250 million people, and members have prayed with more than 20 million who have acknowledged Jesus as their savior (Chancellor 2000: 33). The movement has been least effective, however, in securing permanent conversions. While The Family estimates that at least 40,000 individuals have joined the movement, only about 3000 remain disciples at the present time (Chancellor 2000: 17).

The Family has used a number of methods of evangelism, including public witnessing and personal prayer, "flirty fishing," the most controversial technique and one that has drawn consistent criticism, and distributing movement literature in return for small donations, a practice called "litnessing." During the early 1970s, Berg promoted litnessing both as a way to reach more people before the apocalypse and as a means of financial support for the movement. Illustrated in "True Komix" style and offering a popular, countercultural message, the predictable result was that as the amount of literature distributed increased, personal evangelism and soul winning decreased.

Music has always been an important part of Family life and evangelism. One of the first Family musical groups was Teens for Christ, which Berg organized out of the Light Club coffeehouse in Huntington Beach, California. In France, they formed Les Enfants de Dieu. And, in the late 1970s, seeking a somewhat higher class of potential convert, The Family started a number of Poor Boy Clubs, Christian discos that featured upbeat music and a venue for sharing the gospel message. In 1980, The Family created a radio show, *Music with Meaning*, which within three years was broadcasting on more than 1000 radio stations and reaching an audience estimated to be in the tens of millions. *Music with Meaning* produced audio cassettes and CDs containing both their music and a plea to accept Jesus as one's personal savior. Several million of these have been distributed worldwide.

In a series of Mo Letters beginning in 1973, Berg revealed one of his most significant revelations – "Law of Love" – which both reoriented relationships within the movement and produced new methods of evangelism and provisioning. Berg taught that the gospel of Matthew's famous "love commandment" (22: 36) meant that The Family was now completely free from the Mosaic law, that they had moved from "total

and complete from **the bondage of** the law into **total** and **complete freedom** of life and **liberty** through love!" (Berg 1974b: ¶3; emphases in the original).

The Children of God/The Family and the Issue of Sexuality

The Family's understanding of God's original, perfectly ordered creation, a corrupt contemporary world that has abandoned God's purpose and dismissed each individual as an expression of that purpose, and a final salvation and an eternal life in heaven for those who believe, corresponds in important respects to evangelical Christian theology. Their vision also departs in several significant ways. Belief in progressive revelation and in David Berg's central role as God's Endtime Prophet has placed The Family firmly outside mainstream evangelicalism. Until the 2010 Reboot, their complete rejection of conventional social institutions and cultural values all but forced The Family's withdrawal into protective enclaves where they led a life of faithfulness to God as they understood it. How this changes in the wake of the Reboot remains to be seen. Encounters with outsiders were largely ritualized, and intended to yield resources and protection, to secure salvation for those who pray with them, and to bring in new recruits for the Endtime Army. As The Family evangelized among the "unsaved" and worked through Berg's progressive revelations, the "Law of Love" – which they understood to be Jesus' most important teaching – became their primary mandate. Implementing this mandate within their communities, however, often led to physical intimacy with other Family members, and applying it in their efforts at proselytization led to similar relations with strangers. It was this innovation that most directly brought them into conflict with conventional society.

Sexuality is one of the most powerful individual and social drives, and is, therefore, one of the most closely regulated forms of human behavior. It is not surprising, then, that throughout the history of religious (and other) movements, reorganizing sexual relationships has been one of the ways that different groups have significantly reoriented social relationships, both inside and outside the movement. Two of the most common ways this has occurred are celibacy and free love, since each binds individuals more closely to the movement itself than to other individual members (Coser 1974; Foster 1981). While Unificationism exemplifies the first method, The Family constitutes one version of the second.

It is well established that in the context of emerging and evolving religious movements there is ample opportunity for abusive, exploitative sexual relationships (Jacobs 1989; Neitz and Goldman 1995; Puttick 1997). It is important to note, however, that there is no evidence that sexual deviance occurs more frequently in new religious movements than in their more established counterparts (Shupe 1998; Shupe, Stacey, and Darnell 2000). Experimentation with alternative sexual practices has been commonplace in religious movements of all types, and the potential for (as well as the actuality of) sexual abuse is very real. Since new religious movements are controversial almost by definition, though, charges of abnormal sexual practices and child sexual abuse have long been a staple of countermovement propaganda and social control tactics. Many groups have been accused of sexual exploitation and abuse, some justly and some unjustly.

In The Family, though prosecutions for child sexual abuse have been largely unsuccessful, it is clear that sexual contact between adults and children within the group did occur during at least one period in the movement's history. Other unorthodox sexual practices are also well documented. The two most prominent of these in terms of The Family's changing doctrine and practice are "flirty fishing" or "FFing," as it was known in the group, which meant using sexual enticement as a means of evangelism, and "shared marriage," the practice of open sexual relations among Family members – both of which were based on Berg's conceptualization and interpretation of the "Law of Love."

As early as 1973, Berg and Maria began experimenting with flirty fishing in London. Frequenting various nightclubs, Berg would encourage the young, attractive Maria to dance with unattached men, then invite them back to the table where the two would witness to them. A year later, they moved to Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, and invited a number of their trusted female disciples to join them in the flirty fishing experiment. In a 1973 Mo Letter, which was published nine years later in "True Komix" form (the fantasy art cover of which features a bare-breasted mermaid perched on a fish-hook), Berg wrote:

> If they fall in love with <u>you</u> first before they find it's the <u>Lord</u>, it's just God's bait to hook them! Fascinate the fish with the lure! Make it irresistible! Bring him back for more with Thy love and mercy, Thy lost soul that we don't want to lose – not one, Lord! Make the lure so attractive he cannot resist it! Help her to catch men, be bold, unashamed and brazen, to use anything she has, O God, to catch men for Thee! (1982: 3–4)

Berg and Maria stayed on Tenerife until 1977, when they hastily left the island after local media published exposés that portrayed flirty fishing as little more than religiously motivated prostitution. Given that a number of the Mo Letters from that period encourage members to witness through escort services (or to start their own), this was neither surprising nor unreasonable.

However, that was not at all how the practice of flirty fishing was understood in The Family. As his interpretation of the Law of Love evolved, Berg concluded that sex was a natural desire that should be expressed fully and openly, rather than repressed and hidden as more traditional Christian denominations had demanded for centuries. Witnessing to others to ensure their spiritual salvation has always been the primary mandate of the movement, and for Family members there was no greater moral imperative than to lead others to Christ. Flirty fishing brought these understandings together. From Berg's perspective, no logical distinction exists between the spiritual and the physical needs of an unsaved person. Moreover, The Family's belief in an imminent apocalypse – they were, after all, God's Endtime Army – added a sense of urgency and a certain moral force to FFing. That is, extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. Flirty fishing was seen as evangelism of last resort, the supreme sacrificial act through which disciples demonstrate Christ's love to another person in a tangible and meaningful way. The cover of a 1978 Disciples Only letter, for example, entitled "You Are The Love of God," depicts a naked woman lying on a bed in cruciform position, a large spike protruding from her genital area. Superimposed on the bed beside her is a crucifix, explicitly linking the two images theologically. In the letter, female disciples were told that "the last attack the Devil's making today is on love."

> That's the last attack. So to refute the Devil's lie that there's no love, do this: Like when Jesus died and spread His arms on the cross to show the love of God in death, so when you go to be with a man spread your arms and legs and yield your naked body to him in life and say, "I AM GOD'S LOVE! You don't believe in God? Look at me! I was created for you by the love of God and I am the love of God! I am God's love. (Berg 1978c: 5; emphases in the original)

While it is clear that flirty fishing came to serve a variety of purposes for the movement, members have defended the practice as a legitimate means of saving souls and recruiting new members. In one sense, because they were thought to represent the pure love of God and sought nothing more than

the salvation of lost souls, these encounters were highly ritualistic. Indeed, retrospective accounts emphasize that the flirty fishing ministry was aimed primarily at men and women who were not sexually attractive, the implication being that the rewards experienced by the flirty fishers themselves were spiritual and not physical (cf. Lewis and Melton 1994: 263–266; Williams 1998: 114–141; Chancellor 2000: 94–150).

The Family estimates that just over one million individuals (mostly men) were "flirty fished," and over 200,000 of those were given "full physical love" (Bainbridge 2002: 223). Of these, more than half accepted Jesus as their savior. Curiously, though, during his interviews with Family members, Chancellor reports that he did not find a single male who had been flirty fished, though he did meet several women who joined the movement after being FF-ed by male Family members. While flirty fishing generated a relatively small number of members for the movement, it did cause a major wave of defections. These renunciations, however, were not the only reason the practice was abandoned. It also resulted in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases within The Family; it created financial inequities between homes and a stratification of women based on their success at FF-ing; it gave opponents a ready and significant means of attacking the movement; and the growing number of children in the movement (some of which were the result of flirty fishing) refocused attention on child-rearing.

One of the most audacious pronouncements Berg made through the Mo Letters came in May 1980 with #999: "The Devil Hates Sex! – But God Loves It!" In it, Berg taught Family members that sex "was one of the first and greatest blessings" for Adam and Eve (1980: ¶8), and that the belief that sex is a sin is one of the worst ways the institutional Church has corrupted the truth of creation, a corruption aided and abetted by the Devil.

> JUST THINK, SEX IS PROBABLY THE MOST SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY THERE IS of everything about the body or the physical that comes the closest to something spiritual. An orgasm is really not just physical but it literally flips you out in the Spirit! It's a spiritual experience, just like a gateway to the spiritual world! (Berg 1980: ¶2)

While he continued to condemn "sodomy," Berg considered polygamy "perfectly Biblically legitimate all through the Bible" (1980: ¶15), and vehemently condemned the US government for its anti-polygamous persecution of Mormons. Indeed, as long as sexual activity took place under the aegis of the "law of love" – that is, that everyone took part

willingly, and that sexual activity was loving not lustful – Berg preached that "as far as God's concerned there are no more sexual prohibitions of any kind" (1980: ¶35). In addition to flirty fishing, this included nudity, limited childhood exploration of sexuality, teenage marriage, and sexual sharing among Family members. Not surprisingly, this led to some sexual relationships between adults and teen members, as well as limited sexual contact between adults and children (Van Zandt 1991; Millikan 1994), a practice that did not exclude the possibility of incest. While Berg considered incest "the most dangerous form of sex & the most prohibited by the system" (1980: ¶21), a gloss by Maria in the same letter added that "we'll just have to tell the kids that it's not prohibited by God" (1980: ¶20). According to Berg, the danger came not from any physical and psychological trauma that children might suffer, but from the unenlightened opposition of "the System & the Systemites" (Berg 1980: ¶21) to the practice and the damage it could do to the movement.

Within a very few years, however, the sexual libertinism advocated by DFO #999 was gradually restricted, and a number of the practices Berg endorsed were explicitly repudiated. This began in 1983 with a "Ban the Bomb" proclamation that prohibited sexual sharing at home fellowship meetings, and limited sharing to Family members residing in the same home. A year later, in order to avoid pressure on female converts, Maria prohibited new members from having sexual relations for six months after joining The Family. By the late 1980s, sexual relations between younger women and older men were restricted, between children and younger teens discouraged. Adult sexual contact with children became the basis for excommunication from the movement, and in January 1989 Berg issued a four-page statement renouncing his earlier teachings. "We do not approve of sex with minors," he wrote, "& hereby renounce any writings of anyone in our Family which may seem to do so! We absolutely forbid it!" (Berg 1989: 1; emphases in the original).

Despite this, The Family continues to pay the price for this relatively brief period of sexual experimentation and deviance. Though long discontinued, former members have continued to use information about these practices to convince state authorities to move against The Family on charges of child abuse and sexual molestation (Oliver 1994: 144–150; Bainbridge 2002). In 1993, for example, the magistrate in a landmark Family custody case in England declared that he was "completely satisfied that [Berg] was obsessed with sex and that he became a perverted man who recklessly corrupted his flock" (Lattin 2001a). Ordered by the court

to publicly acknowledge and repudiate past excesses and abuses, The Family also established a Ministry of Reconciliation to redress the failures of the past. Peter Amsterdam, who now leads The Family with Maria, told researcher James Chancellor:

> We know that many people were mistreated and hurt by things The Family did, particularly the leadership. That was never Father David's intent, but it happened. We cannot undo those things. But we can try to find as many as we can and let them know we are deeply sorry. And also that we have changed. We have learned from our mistakes. (Chancellor 2000: 32)

Researching the Children of God/The Family

Few new religious cultures have been as relentlessly literary as the Children of God/The Family. Because, in many ways, it is still a marginalized (often stigmatized) new religious movement and is only now seeking closer association with conventional culture, spiritual knowledge, theological teaching, and institutional mandate have all been transmitted to Family members largely through texts – the Mo Letters, various magazines, newsletters, comic books, and, for the past several years, of course, the World Wide Web. Since, until the 2010 Reboot, these texts were a crucial component in The Family's subcultural currency, in that having access to different kinds of letters and communications from David Berg contributed to – indeed, in many cases, determined – one's cultural capital within the movement, it is difficult to overstate the importance of this material.

From a material culture perspective, it is important to recognize that literature such as this is not simply a collection of texts. It is not merely a vehicle for information, although this is an obvious part of its value. It cannot be considered only in terms of its content. In addition to the knowledge they provide, the physical presence of Family literature – its materiality, its physical presence in and around Family homes – functioned as an indicator of one's place within the context of specific social relationships in The Family. In this way, Family literature became material markers of identity and status. Thus, it is important to note that these are not simply texts qua information; they are often profoundly important aspects of Family theological practice and material culture.

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Chapter 7

The Branch Davidians: The Question of Cults, Media, and Violence – Part I

> *A raid on the heavily armed compound of a religious cult here erupted into a bloody gun battle on Sunday, leaving at least four Federal agents and two cult members dead and at least 15 agents injured.*
>
> *New York Times*, March 1, 1993

> *People are sheltering in the chapel, which is now directly under attack. A tank batters the east wall, poking its snout through the gap its boom has opened. When it releases gas we move in a crowd to the far end of the room. From time to time I remove my mask to judge the quality of the air. Sometimes the gas cloud has dissipated, other times it instantly stings my eyes, forcing tears down my cheeks.*
>
> David Thibodeau, *A Place Called Waco*

Many consider it the single most significant breach of American religious freedom in the twentieth century. On February 28, 1993, 76 agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) staged a "dynamic entry" on the residence of the Branch Davidians, a reclusive and obscure Adventist sect living on a ranch several miles outside Waco, Texas. Ostensibly, federal agents were there to execute a search warrant for illegal and improperly registered weapons, weapons the community's leader, David Koresh, had offered to show them only days before. As the heavily armed officers stormed the wood-frame building, though, they were met with gunfire from within the house. In the ensuing battle five Branch Davidians and four BATF agents were killed. The following day, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) took command of the situation and began a siege of the Davidian residence that lasted 51 days.

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It ended on April 19.

Using combat engineering vehicles, and supported by an M-60 Abrams main battle tank, Bradley fighting vehicles, FBI SWAT and sniper teams, at least one helicopter, and possibly members of the US Army's elite Delta counter-terrorist force, federal agents fired M-79 Ferret tear-gas rounds into the Davidian residence and used the armored vehicles to demolish parts of the structure. Though the government has steadfastly denied using incendiary shells during the final assault – which the FBI incident logs insist was "not an assault" (Leiby 1999) – fire broke out and 74 Davidians died, including David Koresh, and 23 children. (Other estimates of the death toll place the total at 82; Wright 2001: 143.)

Between March 1993 and February 1994, the *New York Times* published over 400 news stories on the Branch Davidians, the government siege, the final conflagration, and the barrage of charges and countercharges that followed. As Catherine Wessinger points out, however, "every act of violence in the Branch Davidian case is disputed" (2000: 57). The BATF argues that it had a valid search warrant; legal scholars suggest that the initial application for the warrant was "riddled with errors of law and fact" (Kopel and Blackman 1996: 1–2). The Davidians claim that the BATF opened fire first; federal agents insist they only returned fire from the Davidians. The FBI maintains that nothing used in the final assault could have started the fire; surviving Davidians, and considerable independent evidence, suggest this is simply not true. While FBI sniper Lon Horiuchi denies firing at the burning residence, effectively cutting off the only means of escape from the blaze, surviving Davidians later brought a wrongful death suit against him for precisely those actions. What is *not* in doubt is that for 51 days the story of the Branch Davidians galvanized media attention around the world and focused once again the question of new religious movements and violence.

The Historical Development of the Branch Davidians

Unlike new religious movements such as the Unification Church or the Church of Scientology, whose histories turn in many ways on the lives of their founders, Branch Davidian history neither begins nor ends with David Koresh. Indeed, though few media reports note it, the origins of the movement reach back more than 150 years to the "Great Disappointment" of 1844, when the followers of William Miller (1782–1849), a barely literate farmer-turned-preacher in upstate New York, looked skyward for

the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Although that did not occur, obviously, the millennial fervor that gripped large numbers of believers at the time continued, and one of the groups that emerged from the Millerite movement became the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA). It is from Seventh-day Adventism and the writings of one of its founders, Ellen G. White (1827–1915), that the Branch Davidians eventually developed.

Four distinct periods mark the evolution of the Davidian movement, each going by a different name and each characterized by the personality of the leadership at the time: Victor and Florence Houteff led the group for three decades, between 1929 and 1959. Ben and Lois Roden took over the leadership for the following 30 years, from 1959 to 1989. Vernon Howell, who took the name David Koresh, challenged Ben Roden for leadership, but led the group for only four years (1989–1993). After the BATF raid and the resulting tragedy, the post-1993 era has seen further factioning among surviving Davidians. Each of the periods following Victor Houteff's death is also marked by struggles both to consolidate leadership of the group and to assume control of the Davidian property outside Waco.

Victor and Florence Houteff (1929–1959)

Victor Houteff (1885–1955) was a Bulgarian immigrant to the United States who, while in his mid-thirties, enthusiastically converted to Seventh-day Adventism and eventually became the assistant superintendent of an Adventist sabbath school in southern California. Although the SDA was founded on belief in the imminent Second Coming of Christ, and while the church still held to that doctrine in principle, Houteff became disillusioned with the institutional nature of the organization and what he regarded as its capitulation to more worldly concerns. In 1929, he began to publish his views in a small newsletter he called *The Shepherd's Rod*. The "rod" is a reference to Micah 6:9, in which the prophet warns the people of Israel that "the man of wisdom shall see thy name," and exhorts them to "hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it." As the "man of wisdom" appointed by God to bring a new prophetic message to the church, Houteff called for a return to the original purpose of Adventism – to unlock the mysteries of the eschaton, and to prepare for Christ's return and the establishment of his millennial kingdom. As William Pitts points out (1995), it is important to note that Houteff did not want to leave the Seventh-day Adventists, nor did he wish to lead a sectarian group out. Rather, like

many other conservative reformers in church history (see Cowan 2003b), Houteff sought the purification of the church and a return to the ideals from which he felt it had fallen or turned away.

Houteff's message consisted of three principal components, each of which would have direct implications for the events at Waco more than 60 years later. First, he taught a progressive revelation, the belief that the prophetic voice is not silent and that God continues to reveal critical information as the faithful are deemed ready to receive and interpret it. Second, as have others throughout Christian history, Houteff believed the true meaning of Scripture lay encoded beneath the surface of the text, and was available only to those few faithful who could successfully decode the message. In this case, Houteff believed that his task – and that of David Koresh more than half a century later – was to decipher the meaning of the mysterious "seven seals" in the book of Revelation, and to reveal the prophetic timetable for the Endtimes. Third, Houteff's mission was to gather a remnant faithful, 144,000 true believers who would prepare the way for the Second Coming of the Christ.

Houteff's teachings found a receptive audience among those Seventh-day Adventists with similar concerns about the direction of their church. Not surprisingly, however, the larger Adventist organization rejected his message and actively worked to discredit him. When theological arguments presented by church leaders failed to deter Houteff, he was officially disfellowshipped in 1934, essentially cast out of the church. A year later, he left Los Angeles with a small group of followers and bought land outside of Waco, Texas. There he established Mount Carmel Center, a prophetic community dedicated to self-sufficiency, Bible study, and the expectation of Christ's soon return. Though he initially preached that, since the Second Coming was imminent, the group's sojourn at Mount Carmel would be brief, the community quickly settled into a more permanent, separatist lifestyle. Functioning as a "patronal clan" (Bromley and Silver 1995), children were educated solely within the community, marriages were endogamous, and though some members worked away from the Mount Carmel property, the community sought to be as self-sufficient as possible. For a time, the group even produced its own currency (Pitts 1995: 26–27). In 1942, in order to secure conscientious objector status for his followers, Houteff renamed the group the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (DSDA).

Plagued by ill health from the late 1940s, Houteff died in 1955, and the mantle of leadership passed to his wife, Florence. Her succession, however, did not go unchallenged, and Florence worked diligently to reinforce her

position in the community. Among other things, she claimed to have solved the puzzle of the seven seals and proclaimed the "Year of the Kingdom," stating that God's earthly reign would be established on April 22, 1959. Her prophecy created a millennial fervor among the Davidian faithful, and between 500 and 1000 members moved to Mount Carmel to await the end. When the moment passed without event, however, another "great disappointment" took hold and within a year only 50 members remained at the Mount Carmel Center. In 1962, after admitting that her prophetic ability was subject to error, Florence closed the center and sold most of the Mount Carmel property to developers. She and her few remaining followers relocated to New Mount Carmel, nine miles outside Waco, the site that would become tragically famous in the spring of 1993.

Benjamin and Lois Roden (1962–1989)

Chief among those who challenged Florence Houteff for leadership of the DSDA was Benjamin Roden (d.1978), like Victor a disfellowshipped Seventh-day Adventist. While Victor located his prophetic authority in Micah 6:9 – and some Davidians even believed him to be the reincarnation of Elijah, who would be resurrected once again in the Endtimes – Ben Roden placed himself in the lineage of King David, supported by the Isaianic prophecy that "there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (11:1). He urged the remaining Davidians to "get off the dead Rod, and move onto a living Branch" (Linedecker 1993: 57) – a not-insignificant prefiguring of the later development of the Branch Davidians under Lois Roden and David Koresh. Florence Houteff eventually left New Mount Carmel, and after lengthy litigation the Rodens gained control of the property, renaming the group the General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (GADSDA).

While Roden governed the group in much the same way the Houteffs had, his prophetic messages had distinct differences from both earlier leaders. The principal difference was the way in which the millennium would manifest. Florence had predicted a catastrophic beginning to the millennial kingdom. Some looked for the outbreak of war in the Middle East, while others watched for the resurrection and return of Victor Houteff, the modern Elijah. Some even believed that the faithful would be caught up in Armageddon, slaughtered as martyrs and raised to eternal life by God (Thibodeau 1999: 36). Ben Roden, on the other hand, preached

a perfectionist millennialism, a belief that the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom would be imminent only once the elect had succeeded in purifying themselves and perfecting their lives in accordance with biblical principles. As Tabor and Gallagher point out, Roden presented himself as the "Branch" prophesied by Zechariah (3:8; 6:12), "the Davidic figure" whose task "was to organize the theocratic Kingdom in preparation for Christ's return" (1995: 39). He encouraged his followers to move to Israel, and interpreted the 1967 Arab–Israeli war as clear evidence that the Endtimes were upon them.

Perhaps the most significant shift in Davidian organization that occurred under Roden's leadership concerned the process of succession. Following Victor Houteff's death, contenders for the leadership relied on a combination of claims to legitimacy and personal charisma to assert their authority within the community. When it became clear that similar infighting would mark his passing, Roden attempted to wed organizational and prophetic authority by introducing into the Davidian bylaws an amendment that read: "The chairman of the executive council, at the command of Heaven by the Lord himself, transfers the office of the president to the One … that God so names" (Bailey and Darden 1993: 60–61). Apparently, the one "God so named" was to be George Roden, Ben's son.

In 1977, however, a year before Ben's death, his wife implicitly asserted her claim to the leadership by disclosing a number of startling theological revelations. Lois claimed to have been "visited by an angel who was said to represent the Holy Spirit Mother" (Pitts 1995: 36), and she began to teach that the third person of the Trinity was actually female. Publishing her views in a magazine called *SHEkinah*, she also taught that at the Second Coming the Messiah would return as a woman. Though it is unclear to what degree Ben supported these teachings, or whether Lois regarded herself as this coming messiah, the real challenge to her leadership of the Davidian movement came from their son, George. When Ben Roden died in October 1978, Lois immediately asserted her right to leadership based on the prophetic revelations she had been receiving for the past year. George, on the other hand, contended that Ben had designated him the successor, that "I was the heir to my father's crown of the house of David" (Bailey and Darden 1993: 69). Though he sought both popular support within the Davidian membership and legal control of the group through the secular courts, and despite the fact that as many as half the membership left in the wake of the Roden family infighting, ultimately Lois prevailed and her son was prohibited by law from entering the Mount Carmel property.

David Koresh (1989–1993)

Vernon Wayne Howell, who is best known in Branch Davidian history as David Koresh, was born August 17, 1959, less than four months after Lois Roden predicted the apocalypse would occur. His mother, 14-year-old Bonnie Clark, was an impetuous and often uncontrollable teenager from Houston, Texas. Though she and the baby's father, 20-year-old Bobby Howell, originally planned to marry, the wedding did not take place, and Vernon's early years were spent shuttling back and forth between his two sets of grandparents. Bonnie's first two marriages resulted in even more severe trauma for the young boy. He was physically abused by his first stepfather, sexually abused by one of his mother's relatives, and somewhat estranged from his mother after a lengthy period when she left him in the care of his grandmother while she lived with her second husband.

Eventually, Vernon was reunited with his mother and her husband in Richardson, Texas, a northern suburb of Dallas. There he attended a local Seventh-day Adventist school and became very involved with the SDA church. By all accounts, Vernon was extremely interested in SDA teachings regarding the end of days and especially questioned why there was no prophet currently leading the church. Though hampered by a variety of learning disabilities, as a teenager Vernon memorized lengthy portions of the Bible and regularly challenged the scriptural interpretations of church leaders. He believed fervently in Adventist doctrine but, like Victor Houteff, also believed that the SDA church had fallen away from its original mission. Vernon often advocated his own theological views to other church members, and even "announced that God intended him to marry the pastor's daughter" (Bromley and Silver 1995: 53). When he refused to submit to the authority of the church, like the other leaders of the various Davidian sects, he was ultimately disfellowshipped.

Vernon Howell's search for a true prophet in the Adventist tradition brought him to Mount Carmel in 1981, where he began working as a handyman. Expressing great interest in Adventist theology, he quickly aligned himself with Lois Roden, who was by that time 67, and whose spiritual and temporal authority in the community were at a low ebb. Though he later denied the allegations, rumors quickly spread that the two were romantically involved. Whatever the nature of the relationship, however, it appeared to serve both their interests. In Lois, Vernon found someone who encouraged his theological interests, and she finally had an ally in her ongoing struggle for control of the Davidian community and its property. In 1983, wary that her son George was still contending for the

leadership, Lois proclaimed Vernon her successor and the next Davidian prophet. As Bromley and Silver point out, Vernon's "rise to leadership was very much a product of patronal clan politics" (1995: 53). Now firmly allied with Lois Roden as prophet and successor, Vernon then cemented relations with Perry and Mary Bell Jones, one of the staunch Davidian families that supported Lois in the wake of Ben's death. A year later, with her father presiding, Vernon married Rachel, the 14-year-old daughter of Perry and Mary Bell.

In 1985, George Roden finally realized his dream of control over the Davidian community – if only briefly. He forced an election for the presidency of the Davidians and won, ejecting his mother, Vernon, and their followers from the property at gunpoint. The exiles settled temporarily in Palestine, Texas, nearly 100 miles away, while George renamed the Mount Carmel property "Rodenville." Lois's death in 1986 did little to ease tensions between the two camps, and a lengthy series of legal disputes ensued. Unlike Vernon, to whom many of the Davidians looked as a prophet, George was not well liked. Suffering from Tourette's syndrome and given to violent outbursts and fits of rage, George's control over the Rodenville community diminished quickly. In addition to the 1979 injunction against him, which Vernon's followers sought to have reinstated, the Davidians also owed $65,000 in back taxes on the Rodenville/Mount Carmel property – taxes the rapidly dwindling community was unable to pay.

Arguably the strangest twist in the ongoing struggle for succession occurred in November 1987, and it led ultimately to Vernon's triumph as the acknowledged leader of the Branch Davidian community. Convinced that he, too, was a prophet anointed by God, George Roden disinterred the body of Anna Hughes, an 85-year-old Davidian who had passed away two decades before and who was buried on the property. As though they were two prophets of ancient Israel, each seeking to demonstrate God's anointing, George challenged Vernon to a spiritual contest to see who could successfully raise Hughes from the dead. Vernon declined the challenge and reported George's actions to the local sheriff. In order to press charges, Vernon was told to provide photographs of the corpse and on November 3, 1987, he led a party of armed men onto the Rodenville property. Gunfire was exchanged for nearly an hour, and George Roden was slightly injured in the battle. Vernon and his companions were arrested and charged with attempted murder. After a brief trial in April 1988, however, the charges were dismissed. Roden, on the other hand, was arrested both for violating the restraining orders taken out years earlier by his mother and for

contempt of court, ostensibly a result of his Tourette's syndrome. The day after Roden's arrest, Vernon and the Branch Davidians from the Palestine encampment moved back onto the property outside Waco. They paid the outstanding tax bill, cleaned up parts of the property that had fallen into disrepair, and assumed undisputed control over Mount Carmel.

Beliefs and Practices of the Branch Davidians under David Koresh

Daily life at Mount Carmel was dominated by an intense devotionalism and twice-daily Bible study sessions that often lasted several hours. Like the earlier Davidian groups, the Branch Davidians not only believed they were living in the Endtimes, but that they were key figures in the unfolding of the apocalypse. Thus, for the Branch Davidians, Bible study was not simply a devotional activity that took place in addition to more routine administrative matters – as it is in many churches. For them, the Bible was a divine guide to the very times in which they were living and to the roles God expected them to play. Indeed, Koresh taught that the great tribulation that many Christians believe will precede the Second Coming of Christ had already begun, and that the Mount Carmel community – which he renamed in 1992 "Ranch Apocalypse" – was a central player in that Endtimes scenario. While tens of millions of American Christians hold to one interpretation or another of the Endtimes – the belief that humanity is approaching the close of history, the final battle between good and evil, and the establishment of the millennial kingdom – relatively few place themselves so completely at the center of the stage as the Branch Davidians. Rather than as a way to understand how God has worked in the past, their interpretation of events placed them on the horizon of a future that was unfolding literally in their midst and before their eyes.

Although, like all the groups considered in this book, the span of the Branch Davidian belief system is considerably more complex than can be adequately discussed in a few pages, within the context of the imminent apocalypticism that marked the group under David Koresh, three defining moments emerge: Vernon Howell's name change to David Koresh; Koresh's claim to be able to unlock the seven seals of Revelation; and the New Light doctrine that precipitated what are arguably the most significant defections from the Branch Davidian group in Waco.

Most people familiar with the Branch Davidian conflict know Vernon Howell only as David Koresh, the name he legally assumed in August 1990

and by which the world came to know him during the siege. When he changed his name, he chose "David" to mark what he believed was his place in the lineage of the biblical King David, the line from which the awaited messiah would come. "Koresh," on the other hand, is Hebrew for "Cyrus," the Persian king who conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE. Nearly 50 years earlier, the Babylonians had taken the Israelites into captivity, and Cyrus was regarded as a "messiah" for God's people, one anointed to a special task or mission – in this case, allowing the Israelites to return home. Though the media regularly reported that David Koresh claimed to be the historical Jesus Christ, this misses the crucial distinction between *a* messiah and *the* messiah in Branch Davidian theology. Like the ancient Israelites whom Cyrus had freed from the Babylonians, Koresh led his people apart from the modern Babylon, the corrupt world system by which they were surrounded.

Koresh did believe that he was a messiah, like Cyrus, one specially anointed by God for a particular mission, but he did not claim to be the reincarnation of the historical Jesus, which is clearly the implication of media reporting. Linking his personal biography to a messianic lineage, however, Koresh supported his claim to prophetic status through his charismatic interpretation of scripture and, like other Davidian leaders before him, his special call to unlock the seven seals of Revelation. In 1985, while traveling in Israel with Rachel, who was by then pregnant with their first child, Cyrus, Vernon had an epiphany: he began to understand himself as the seventh angel of Revelation 10:7, the one who would unfold the final mysteries of God about the Endtimes. Returning from Israel, his teaching apparently took on a more urgent tone. Commenting on tape recordings made of his teaching sessions before and after the 1985 experience, Tabor and Gallagher note that "in the earlier materials Koresh clearly knows the texts of the Bible well, but his teaching is routine and tends to be rather straightforward, even dull at times. In the later materials he is full of energy and shows great skill in weaving together many dozens of complicated images and concepts" (1995: 59).

Revelation 5 introduces the seven seals that were the linchpin both of Koresh's self-understanding as a prophet and of his authority within the Branch Davidian community. Taken to heaven in a vision, the author of Revelation is shown a book or scroll "sealed with seven seals" (Revelation 5:1), each one a key to some crucial event in the Endtimes. Among other things, for example, the first four seals unleash what have become known in Christian theology as the "four horsemen of the apocalypse." A central question in Revelation 5, though, is who is worthy to break the seals, open

the book, and proclaim its contents. The author is told that "the Lamb" who comes from "the root of David" is the only one so qualified. Although Christian eschatology traditionally identifies the Lamb with Jesus Christ, for the Branch Davidians it was David Koresh.

During the siege, one of the first scholars who offered to help the FBI translate the dense biblical language in which Koresh spoke, much of which had to do with the seven seals and all of which the federal authorities were at a loss to understand, was religious studies professor James Tabor. Although his help was ultimately refused by the FBI, Tabor points out that as the community's separationist interpretation of scripture proceeded during the Koresh period, the veracity of Koresh's claims became increasingly and inextricably linked to the reliability of the Bible itself. If the one were not true, then the other could not be. "Koresh had demonstrated to the satisfaction of his followers" writes Tabor (1995: 267), "that this particular figure, this Lamb, could not be Jesus of Nazareth, the first-century Messiah. He claimed that he could prove from the Bible that another 'Christ' figure was pictured here" – David Koresh.

Koresh's self-identification as the Lamb from the book of Revelation led to one of the most problematic shifts in Branch Davidian belief and practice: the New Light doctrine he began to proclaim in 1989. Revelation 19:7 speaks of the "marriage of the Lamb," and how "his wife hath made herself ready." Based on his interpretation of this, rather than a purely spiritual salvation, Koresh taught that his messianic mission was to create a new lineage of God's children, a new House of David that would ultimately reign over the new heaven and the new earth predicted at the end of Revelation. Though Koresh began taking other "spiritual wives" as early as 1987, this new doctrine revealed that he would be the messianic husband to all female members of the community and father divine offspring through them. Though many members were skeptical of the New Light doctrine, some believed it implicitly. "That's something that people don't quite seem to get," Branch Davidian Alisa Shaw explained to the *Houston Chronicle* during the siege:

> A central part of the message (of Revelation) is the marriage of the Lamb. That's the way to salvation. People are interpreting the wives and children in a very worldly sense, without understanding the message. There are a few (women) who are worthy to be sown with the seed of God and produce children. It's considered an honor to have a baby for Christ. (Quoted in Fair 1993)

The New Light revelation precipitated two significant responses – one within the Branch Davidian community almost immediately, the other in the way the community was portrayed during the siege. Within the community, many members felt that Koresh was pressuring them to provide their daughters, sisters, even their wives for his sexual gratification. While this led to a number of defections, the most important were those of Marc Breault and his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai. A member of the Branch Davidians since 1986, Breault became increasingly concerned about Koresh's teachings, and broke completely once the New Light doctrine was revealed. Breault and his wife moved to Australia in late 1989, and he immediately began a campaign to expose Koresh as a false prophet. Working with local media and Australian law enforcement officials, Breault painted the picture of Koresh that would inform the media portrayal throughout the siege – a religious megalomaniac, a rampant polygamist and sexual predator, and a child abuser. By 1992, he was also suggesting that the Branch Davidians were planning to commit mass suicide, and that unless Texas authorities intervened Ranch Apocalypse would become "another Jonestown" (Hall 1995: 218–219).

The Siege at Waco and the Problem of Mass Media

Growing out of the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, the Branch Davidian movement combined relatively conventional, though conservative Protestant theology with sectarian SDA innovations, and then added its own unique theological doctrines during each period of its history. Like many other groups we have discussed, for Branch Davidians the unseen order constituted a perfect and divinely purposeful creation in which humans could realize their true spiritual nature, but from which humankind has now fallen and lost touch. Placing great emphasis on the corrupted state of humanity, Adventist groups live in the expectation of the imminent Second Coming of Christ, and in their particular role as a faithful remnant bridging the transition between the old and new orders. Through ongoing revelations and the prophetic teachings of their leaders, Adventists believe they are unlocking the real message of the Bible concerning the Endtimes.

Vernon Howell continued those Adventist themes in a number of ways. By taking on a prophetic role for himself as David Koresh, and announcing his prophetic mission to unlock the secrets contained in the

seven seals of Revelation, he intensified the group's millennial expectations. By teaching that the great tribulation had in fact already commenced, he built a tight-knit community that was preparing for its own pivotal role as the faithful remnant in Endtime events. In these respects, many other groups in the Adventist tradition were remarkably similar to the Davidians.

However, where Koresh deviated significantly was in his own assumption of a messianic role and his proclamation of the New Light doctrine. By teaching that it was his divinely appointed task to father a lineage of children who would rule the new heaven and new earth, Koresh created both internal opponents – apostates who rejected his messianic claims over their wives and daughters – and external opponents – federal agencies, child protection services, and investigative journalists, all of whom sought to discredit and prosecute him. Whatever his motivations, Koresh's actions played directly into the hands of this coalition, and they encountered little opposition in portraying him as an archetypal cult leader who ruthlessly exploited and abused his followers.

Whatever else is unclear about the siege itself, that there was a significant clash of worldviews is beyond dispute, and that any communication between the Branch Davidians and federal authorities was hampered by each side's inability to understand the worldview of the other. On the one hand, though he gave no specific timetable, Koresh repeatedly told the FBI that he and his followers would come out peaceably once he had completed his written exposition of the seven seals. He maintained that this was his principal prophetic calling and he could not abandon it even in the face of an armed siege of his home. FBI agents, on the other hand, were faced with a crisis that was so far outside their range of experience that they deployed a hostage negotiation and rescue team on site – despite the fact that there was no evidence an actual hostage situation existed at Mount Carmel. While one group saw the end of the world unfolding in their front yard exactly as they predicted, the other chose to respond to a crisis that they misunderstood in the most fundamental ways. Since the events of the siege have been amply detailed elsewhere (see the suggestions for further reading below), we will concentrate here on the perception of the siege – and of the Branch Davidians – that was created by the mass media. In particular, we will focus on three aspects of this issue: FBI control of information presented through the media; the media presentation of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians during the siege; and the broader implications of mass media for the rare intersection of new religious movements and violence.

It is axiomatic that mass media, whether print, broadcast, or electronic, now provide the lens through which the vast majority of people learn about and come to understand events in which they are not directly involved. Only a relatively small proportion of our information about the world comes to us directly; the vast majority is mediated to us by outside sources. As Cowan and Hadden point out, "Not only do the media determine where a particular lens will be trained and at what time, they also determine how that lens will be focused, how long the camera behind it will roll, and perhaps most importantly, what aspects of the story will be left outside its field of view" (2004: 65). This assumes, of course, that the media have access to the events in question, that they are not required to rely solely on official statements or third-party reporting for their information, and that they are willing and able to communicate with the various stakeholders in a given story. None of these was the case at Mount Carmel, and there are, in fact, no independent witnesses to the events that took place. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

As soon as it became evident that the standoff would not be resolved quickly, the FBI established total control over the flow of information to the media and banned any media communication with Branch Davidian members inside the residence. As the drama unfolded, several hundred media reporters were gradually moved further and further from the scene until they were three miles away from Mount Carmel. Denied access to those inside the Davidian residence, the media's only source of information was the daily press briefings by the FBI. These served two apparent purposes. First, they presented only the image of David Koresh and his followers that served the FBI's institutional and tactical ends. And, second, because the Branch Davidians could receive radio and television signals, in an attempt to end the stalemate the FBI used the media as a pipeline for disinformation about the group. Indeed, this became so evident to those inside the residence that Davidians hung bed-sheets from upper-floor windows pleading to tell their side of the story. On March 9, for example, one such banner read "God Help Us. We Want the Press," while five days later another read, "FBI broke negotiations, we want press" (Moore 1995: 211).

"The FBI exploited the media throughout the episode," concludes sociologist James Richardson, "by carefully editing information and issuing only reports that placed their actions in the most positive light" (1995: 165). Though this treatment clearly angered and frustrated journalists, there was little they could do about it. Those who attempted to break the FBI's information embargo were quickly arrested and removed

from the property. Richardson quotes a *Houston Post* reporter who summarized the feeling of the media:

> The FBI … was kind of using us like tools. Most of us could sense it at the time, but we did not have a great deal of alternative. When the FBI said something as a matter of fact, we tried to be reasonably skeptical about it … but it wasn't easy to juxtapose it next to somebody else's version of the same thing. They [the FBI] had the only version. (Terry Kliewer, quoted in Richardson 1995: 169 n.12)

While there are a number of factors that determine what makes a situation newsworthy and shape how news media report on them (see Cowan and Hadden 2004), two of the most important are the socially negative nature of an event, and the conceptual clarity and concision with which complex events can be communicated to media consumers. One of the fundamental axioms of media reporting is "if it bleeds, it leads" – regardless of the medium, bad news almost always leads the order in which stories are presented. In practical terms, this means that often the only time media consumers hear or read about certain social phenomena – such as new religious movements – is when something terrible has happened.

In reality, though, while events such as the Waco tragedy are extremely rare, especially given the large number of new religions, media consumers rarely hear of these groups except when they have reached what Bromley has called a "dramatic dénouement" (Bromley 2002), a crisis moment when religion and violence intersect. Once that happens, not only has the threshold of newsworthiness been crossed, but often the manner in which the conflict will be framed has been firmly determined. Consider, for example, the leads that ran in four major American daily newspapers the day after the initial BATF assault on Mount Carmel:

> Federal agents attempting to serve search warrants on a heavily armed religious camp near here were ambushed by raging gunfire that left four of them dead and 15 others injured, some seriously. (*Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1993)

> Four federal agents were killed and 16 other agents were injured yesterday during a gun battle that erupted when more than 100 law enforcement officers began a long-planned raid on the compound of a heavily armed religious cult near Waco, Tex. (*Washington Post*, March 1, 1993)

> A raid on the heavily armed compound of a religious cult here erupted into a bloody gun battle on Sunday, leaving at least four Federal agents and two cult members dead and at least 15 agents injured. (*New York Times*, March 1, 1993)
>
> More than 200 lawmen descended on the Mount Carmel commune late Sunday where a federal agent from Houston and three others were killed in a gunfight with members of a violent religious cult yearning for the end of the world. (*Houston Chronicle*, March 1, 1993)

Despite the complex dynamics of the Branch Davidian worldview and the paucity of information available to the media just hours after the raid, it is easy to see that the conceptual lines in the conflict have already been drawn with considerable clarity. On the one hand, "federal agents" lead the story in each instance, while in three of the four stories news consumers had to read much deeper in each article to learn that Branch Davidians had also been killed in the initial assault. This is exacerbated in the *Houston Chronicle*, which employs the frontier language common to the region, referring to the BATF members not as "agents," but by the more colloquial term, "lawmen."

Further, the manner in which the battle is described uniformly supports the BATF version of events. Federal agents were "ambushed by raging gunfire" as they executed a "long-planned raid" and attempted "to serve a search warrant." While the last two of these may not be technically inaccurate, media reports clearly place the blame for the conflict on the Branch Davidians, and do not in any way present the totality of the situation. The Davidians, on the other hand, are presented unambiguously as "a heavily armed religious cult," "a violent religious cult yearning for the end of the world." Rather than a group of wood-frame buildings, many of which were nearly 50 years old and a number of which stood in various states of disrepair, BATF agents were confronted with "a heavily armed religious camp" and forced to penetrate "the cult's armed fortress" (Stammer 1993). "David Koresh was portrayed as delusional, a dangerous and unstable religious fanatic – another characterization that did not change" throughout the siege (Cowan and Hadden 2004: 76).

As we said, one of the pressures faced by journalists in a crisis situation is the need to communicate the substance of a story with clarity and concision. Whether the journalists on site actually believe what they are reporting or not, the reality is that they must gain media consumers' attention quickly and surely, or risk losing them to another station, channel, or newspaper. Because they are hampered both by the necessities of their

industry and by the control of information by official sources, journalists often resort to a culturally resonant form of media shorthand in order to paint the news picture as simply as possible. Complexity, nuance, and sophisticated analysis do not serve this agenda. Whatever the reality of the situation, the actors in a given drama are often separated by the media into clear and distinct moral categories.

In terms of the siege at Waco, the most obvious element of this is the continual reference to the Branch Davidians as a dangerous "cult" and Koresh as a delusional "cult leader." Because the vast majority of news consumers (or news reporters) have very little idea what a "cult" is – either historically or sociologically – the word's overwhelmingly negative connotation controls both the representation and the interpretation of suspect groups. Indeed, by consistently portraying federal authorities and the Branch Davidians as they did, the media actively contributed to the ongoing stigmatization of the religious group. Thus, the events were not presented as a standoff between two groups with radically different perceptions of the situation, each of which needed to be considered on its own merits. Rather, "it is almost a Manichean conflict between order and chaos, between the forces of good (the BATF, the FBI, and the Attorney General's Office) and those of evil ('the heavily armed religious cult')" (Cowan and Hadden 2004: 77).

Or consider the relatively innocuous word "compound." Readers will have noticed that throughout this chapter we have not referred to the Branch Davidian residence at Mount Carmel as a "compound," though this term was used extensively in media reporting of the siege. Along with terms such as "heavily armed," "religious camp," and "armed fortress," concepts like "compound" invoke what Robin Wagner-Pacifici labels "the discourse of war" (1994: 55–56, 136–138), and in doing so reduces the possibility of a peaceful resolution. Calling Mount Carmel a "home," for example, or a "residence," even a "church" – since this was their principal place of worship – changes the perception of the situation considerably and potentially reduces the public's willingness to accept the official version of such an event.

Finally, as the siege wore on and the FBI grew more and more frustrated with the Branch Davidians' refusal to quit their home until Koresh had finished his interpretation of the seven seals, federal agents made more proactive attempts to end the stalemate and force a resolution. As the *Houston Chronicle* reported on events that day:

> Branch Davidians may plan to use their children as human shields if they again exchange gunfire with federal agents surrounding their

> compound near here, federal agents said Monday. That fear manifested itself Sunday as federal agents used armored vehicles to clear brush and removed parked vehicles from the yard surrounding the cult's bunker, FBI spokesman Richard Swensen said. As the lumbering, tank-like vehicles neared the structure – sometimes appearing to bump it – adults could be seen inside the building, hoisting youngsters as if to frame them in the windows. "It certainly wasn't something, in my opinion, in the kids' best interest," Swensen said. "If something had happened, holding the kids up for shields in a window is not a great thing to do." (Bragg, Keeton, and Asin 1993)

Though the charge that the Branch Davidians would use their children as "human shields" was not widely repeated, indeed it appears limited to the *Houston Chronicle*, its use here is instructive for three reasons. First, for many American news consumers it would have drawn to mind events during the first Gulf War only two years earlier, when Saddam Hussein was regularly accused of using Iraqi civilians and captured military personnel as human shields. Second, by using words and phrases such as "compound" and "the cult's bunker," this reinforces the "discourse of war" that had come to frame the entire standoff. Third, this portrayal completely ignores other, more reasonable interpretations of the events. For example, the Branch Davidians regularly pleaded with the FBI to stand down for the sake of the children inside. Given this, could the activity of "tank-like vehicles" "lumbering" around the building, close enough to "bump it," be both frightening and dangerous to those inside? Is it not at least as plausible that the children were not being used as human shields at all, but were hoisted up to remind the FBI that they were in there, that it was the tanks that put their lives at risk, not their parents, friends, and co-religionists? Because the media frame was so firmly established by this point, however, these alternative explanations were *never* considered in the press.

Contrary to what many news consumers may believe, and recognizing the official constraints that are often placed on media personnel, "news" is not necessarily that which happens on any given day in a particular part of the world. It is that which is deemed "newsworthy" by various media stakeholders – editors and journalists, advertisers on whom media depend for revenue, and shareholders in media corporations to whom news producers are ultimately responsible. The criteria for newsworthiness, some of which we have touched on here, are reasonably well established. In the case of the Branch Davidian tragedy, unfortunately, precisely those elements that made the story newsworthy obscured the more significant

and complex dynamics that underpinned the confrontation. This virtually ensured that the vast majority of media consumers would never understand the complexity of Davidian history, the Branch Davidians' side of the Waco story, or the role of federal agents in provoking the confrontation.

Researching the Branch Davidians

Hopefully, throughout this book we have conveyed the understanding that new religious movements are considerably more complex and more difficult to appreciate than the ways in which media most often portray them. Strictly speaking, though, "movements," new religious or otherwise, don't do anything; "institutions" do not act; "churches" do not believe anything or do not behave in this way or that. Only *people* do things; only men and women *believe* and *act*. There is neither belief nor behavior apart from the social actors through whom each is embodied – an important point that is all too often lost in the rush to tell a story simply and succinctly. As we note above, one of the ways in which certain social actors – ex-Branch Davidians angered by Koresh's New Light doctrine, for example, or federal agents confronted and confused by his apocalyptic rhetoric – control the representation of new religious movements is by silencing those who remain in the group of their own free will, refusing to let them tell their own story and discounting it when they try. Recall that the brainwashing hypothesis posits that since no one chooses to stay in a new religious movement of their own free will, precisely because their will has been compromised by the group, anything they say in the group's defense is, almost by definition, suspect. As long as academic critics, media detractors, and countermovement activists limit the ways in which group members are portrayed, our understanding of these groups, their motivations and aspirations, the reasons people leave or choose to stay, will be similarly limited, incomplete, and, ultimately, inaccurate.

There is, however, no a priori reason why the testimony of those who participate in suspect groups should be taken any less seriously than that of those who chose to leave or of people who belong to more socially acceptable religious traditions. Indeed, what makes the beliefs of one group seem outlandish, while another's barely raises our notice, is often the social position occupied by the latter over the former. Simply because one group's doctrinal beliefs, ritual behaviors, or worship practices differ from dominant norms is insufficient reason either to dismiss their claims or to refuse to take them seriously. We don't have to believe that what they are saying

is true in any ontological sense, but we are required to take account of the social fact that they believe it, that they are willing to base their behavior on it, and, in this, they are no different than the rest of us.

In the wake of the Branch Davidian tragedy, sociologist Catherine Wessinger has diligently pursued one particular approach to taking the voices of survivors seriously: the *biographical or autobiographical approach*. That is, rather than simply writing *about* those who survived the attack, in a series of books Wessinger facilitates the ability of Branch Davidians to tell their own stories in their own words (see Martin 2009; Haldeman 2007; Doyle 2012). As Wessinger notes in the introduction to *When They Were Mine*, the story of Sheila Martin, who lost her husband and four of her children in the fire, "the most important thing I want the readers of this book to know is that there were people at Mount Carmel with David Koresh, who were living lives every day, who had the same hopes, dreams, wishes, and desires as everyone else" (in Martin 2009: 1).

Wessinger's method was simple, but not easy. Several interviews with each of the participating Branch Davidians were tape-recorded and transcribed. From the mass of material these interviews yielded, Wessinger worked with the subject to craft the material into an autobiography. Wessinger edited, but the Branch Davidians told their own stories. These become, then, compelling, first-person narratives that challenge, often in profound and disturbing ways, the dominant narratives about events at Mount Carmel in early 1993. Less straightforward, however, is gaining the kind of trust necessary for this approach to new religions study. That is, the researcher must almost entirely subsume his or her agenda in order to allow the voices of the real participants to be heard. This requires constant checking and rechecking as the interviews are shaped into a coherent narrative. Without that level of trust, this approach simply cannot work. It will become, as so many stories do, lives told in the service of someone else. Wessinger is one of the few academics who have earned this trust and hers is an excellent example for younger scholars to follow.

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Chapter 8

Heaven's Gate: The Question of Cults and Violence – Part II

> *Whether Hale-Bopp has a "companion" or not is irrelevant from our perspective. However, its arrival is joyously very significant to us at "Heaven's Gate." The joy is that our Older Member in the Evolutionary Level Above Human (the "Kingdom of Heaven") has made it clear to us that Hale-Bopp's approach is the "marker" we've been waiting for – the time for the arrival of the spacecraft from the Level Above Human to take us home to "Their World" – in the literal Heavens. Our 22 years of classroom here on planet Earth is finally coming to conclusion – "graduation" from the Human Evolutionary Level. We are happily prepared to leave "this world" and go with Ti's crew.*
>
> Heaven's Gate, *Red Alert*

On March 27, 1997, Americans awoke to breaking news out of the exclusive Rancho Santa Fe district, 20 miles north of San Diego. Thirty-nine members of a reclusive UFO group known as "Heaven's Gate," including their leader, who at that time went by the name of "Do," had committed ritual suicide in a carefully planned and meticulously executed fashion. When authorities arrived at the group's rented mansion, they found the bodies throughout the house, lying peacefully either on bunk beds or cots. Ranging in age from 20 to 72, the 21 women and 18 men were dressed in similar "uniforms" – a long-sleeved black shirt left untucked over long black pants, new black-and-white Nike sneakers, and on the left shoulder of each shirt a patch that read "Heaven's Gate Away Team." Each had identification tucked into their pockets, along with a five-dollar bill and a few quarters. Sitting near each body, a small overnight bag contained clothing, some spiral-bound notebooks, and lip balm. Diamond-shaped purple shrouds

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draped the bodies, covering their heads and extending to their knees. There were no obvious signs of violence, and the site commander for the San Diego sheriff's department commented that they looked as though they had simply fallen asleep.

Exit statements left by members of the group suggest that it is likely the "Away Team," which was also known as the "Next Level Crew," began their "exits" on March 22, when the Hale–Bopp comet made its closest approach to Earth. Based on a complex series of teachings extending back more than two decades, group members came to believe that the arrival of Hale–Bopp in early 1997 was the sign that they were to leave their bodies behind and continue their spiritual journey on another plane of existence, known as the "Evolutionary Level Above Human." Whether the group believed that there was a spacecraft actually cloaked in the tail of comet, as was widely reported at the time, it is clear that members of the "Away Team" believed they were going to meet a spaceship of some kind. Once free of their earthly containers, the "Away Team" would incarnate in new physical bodies aboard the spacecraft and take up positions there as members of its crew.

As Anlody, one of those who exited with the "Away Team", wrote a little more than a month before the suicides:

> Consider a scenario where Hale-Bopp comes close enough to devastate the planet. Let's say this companion to Hale-Bopp did indeed turn out to be a spaceship of the Next Level. The advanced occupants of this spaceship know the purpose of Hale-Bopp is to recycle the planet. They've sent it here to give the planet a rest from the corrupt humans infesting it. Suppose they send shuttles ahead to rescue any soul worth saving. We're not sure. (Anlody 1997)

Five weeks later, however, Anlody and the rest of the Next Level Crew were certain enough to leave their "physical containers" behind and make what they believed was the transition to the "Kingdom Level." "To us," Anlody wrote in conclusion, "an invitation to exit Earth is an invitation to go home" (1997).

Ti, Do, and the Origins of Heaven's Gate

Unlike other founders of new religious movements, such as L. Ron Hubbard, David Berg, or Sun Myung Moon, information about Bonnie Lu Nettles (1924–1985) and Marshall Herff Applewhite, Jr. (1931–1997), the

founders of Heaven's Gate, is relatively sparse and uncontested. Known at various time as "Guinea and Pig," "Tiddly and Wink," "the Two," "Bo and Peep," and finally "Ti and Do," Applewhite and Nettles led a nomadic and reclusive lifestyle for much of the two decades of Heaven's Gate's existence. What little is known about them, however, does not appear to be in dispute (see Balch 1982).

Applewhite grew up in Texas, the son of a stern and domineering Presbyterian minister. By all accounts, he was a talented musician who, among numerous other musical accomplishments, sang with the Houston Grand Opera (Phelan 1976) and staged musical theater productions that invariably drew "rave reviews" (Balch 1982: 28). Although he studied for the Presbyterian ministry early in his adult life, he ultimately chose a career as a music professor, teaching in the early 1960s at the University of Alabama and later at St. Thomas University in Houston.

Married with two children, Applewhite seemed to be living the ideal academic life in Alabama. Sociologist Robert Balch, who followed Heaven's Gate for most of its history, writes that Applewhite was a "popular teacher and respected director" (1982: 30). There was, however, a darker, more troubled side. Applewhite was plagued both by doubts about his decision not to enter church ministry and by growing ambivalence about his sexual orientation. In 1965, two years into his appointment at the University of Alabama, his marriage ended; his wife left him and took their children back to Texas. According to Balch, it remains unclear whether their separation was the result of his homosexuality or whether that was simply one contributing factor among many. The same year, though, he also lost his job at the university. News reports following the 1997 suicides indicate that he left "amid whispers of a homosexual affair" (Thomas *et al.* 1997), but Balch writes that Applewhite "lost his job because of a personal difference with the chairman of his department" (1982: 30). Whether the two are related remains similarly unclear.

Though more open about his sexuality after his divorce, Applewhite still "felt guilty about his double life, and confided to at least one of his lovers his longing for a meaningful, platonic relationship where he could develop his full potential without sexual entanglements" (Balch 1995: 141). Together, this desire for platonic relationships as a medium for spiritual development and the need to abandon all contact with one's family as a prerequisite for that growth would bear drastic fruit as the Heaven's Gate group evolved over the coming years.

After his divorce, Applewhite moved to Texas and began to teach at St. Thomas University, a small Roman Catholic college founded by the

Basilian Fathers. Hired initially to create a fine arts program on campus, he "quickly became a charismatic teacher and successful fundraiser for the university. His musical productions won rave reviews in the Houston press" (Balch 1995: 141).

Once again well liked by his students and colleagues, and now lauded by the local media for his talents, Applewhite seemed to put his troubled past behind him. He could not, however, escape what he regarded as the sexual demons that haunted him, and in 1970 he was fired from St. Thomas. While a media report written after the 1997 suicides, and which quoted university records, claims that he was dismissed "for 'health problems of an emotional nature'" (Thomas *et al.* 1997), Balch asserts that his career there ended "following an scandal involving one of his students" (1995: 141). Though many news reports intimate that this was a homosexual affair, it appears not. Rather, in an effort to repress his homosexuality he began an affair with a female student, the daughter of a university trustee. "Shortly before they were to be married," writes Balch (1982: 32), "Herff unexpectedly broke off the relationship and the girl attempted suicide. Her family blamed him, and he reportedly left town suddenly after the girl's brother threatened his life. Not long afterwards Herff was fired." Once again, he went from being a respected member of the academy and of the local arts community to a virtual pariah.

Unfortunately, considerably less is known about Bonnie Nettles. Born in Houston as Bonnie Lu Truesdale, she was raised a Baptist. At the time she and Applewhite met she was married and had four children. Her marriage, evidently, was not a happy one, and broke up shortly after she and Applewhite began to explore their own relationship. Although it is clear that she never completely abandoned her Christian beliefs, Nettles was also heavily involved in alternative spirituality, what we would call now the "New Age" subculture. She filled her spare time with participation in the Theosophical Society, an astrology column that she wrote for a local newspaper, and spiritualism. Where Applewhite's world was the theater, hers was metaphysics – domains, some would argue, that are neither incompatible nor incommensurable. Where Applewhite's performances lifted the audience out of their ordinary reality, if only for a short time, "hers was a magical reality of signs, omens, spirits, ascended masters, and higher levels of reality" (Balch 1982: 34).

Shortly after meeting Nettles for the first time, Applewhite's job performance began to suffer, and he was fired from his position as music director of a local theater. During this period as well he began hearing voices and "openly wondered if, perhaps, he too was being contacted by

supernatural forces" (Balch 1982: 32). Applewhite and Nettles decided to strike out on their own, and opened the "Christian Arts Center." Operating out of facilities rented from a local church, in addition to musical theater the center offered a wide range of metaphysical classes, including astrology and spiritualism. This concerned members of the church greatly, and some of the most vocal objected both to the use of the word "Christian" in the title and to the "persistent rumours that seances were being conducted in church facilities" (Balch 1982: 35). In a *Houston Post* feature on the center, Applewhite supported Nettles's claims to spiritualist contact, though he expressed reservation about how those not quite so open-minded might take it. Not long after, yet again Applewhite lost his latest job – as director of music at an Episcopal church. The Christian Arts Center closed a month later.

Undaunted, however, Applewhite and Nettles almost immediately opened another center for the study of metaphysics, this time called Know Place. According to Balch (1982: 36), this was a defining moment in Applewhite's development as a spiritual teacher. Now unemployed and all but unemployable, he abandoned his interest in a musical career entirely and immersed himself in Nettles's occult world, studying Theosophical texts and teaching a select group of students. This was also a period of increasing social and cognitive isolation, during which Applewhite's own spiritual trauma deepened. Both Applewhite and Nettles began to dream of UFOs and of their own place in some grand cosmic plan. Gradually, they came to regard themselves as "two members of the Kingdom of Heaven (or what some might call two aliens from space) incarnated into two unsuspecting humans in Houston" (Heaven's Gate 1988a). As they retreated further and further into their own world, they began to interpret their experiences as the manifestation of extraterrestrial intelligences operating within their physical beings.

Beliefs and Practices of Heaven's Gate

In early 1973, Applewhite and Nettles left Houston and began the peripatetic lifestyle that marked the emergence and development of the group that eventually became Heaven's Gate. Camping and working at odd jobs as they traveled, they explored the deeper meaning of their paranormal experiences, meaning that was characterized by three central moments over the next three years: (i) the revelation and ongoing understanding of their mission; (ii) the publication of the "First Statement

of Ti and Do"; and (iii) the infamous Oregon meeting that brought their nascent group to national attention.

By May of that year, they arrived in southwest Oregon and set up camp along the Rogue River, a place they called "the Hideaway" (Balch 1995: 142). A few months later, Applewhite was meditating by the river and claims to have experienced a revelation described variously as "a vibration like thunder" (Balch 1982: 40) and "a whiff of smelling salts" (Balch 1995: 142). With that, the two awoke to their true purpose. No longer were they Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles, disgraced music director and former registered nurse, but they were in reality the Two Witnesses described in the biblical book of Revelation. According to the author of Revelation, in the last days of human history God will anoint two witnesses and give them extraordinary prophetic power. When the appointed time of their prophetic ministry expires, they will be assassinated, killed by "the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit" (Revelation 11:7). Their bodies will lie untouched in the street for three and a half days, until God resurrects them and "they ascended up to heaven in a cloud" (Revelation 11:12). It became clear to Applewhite and Nettles not only that they were these two witnesses, but that the "cloud" was a spaceship that would come to take them to the physical Kingdom of Heaven. Their prophetic task, then, was to teach the true meaning of these endtime events and to prepare as many students as possible to make the "transition from the human level to the next level" (Heaven's Gate 1975).

They continued their itinerant ministry for nearly two years, as Balch records, visiting New Age shops and centers, calling on anyone they found open to their message, and "planting notes signed 'The Two Witnesses' in churches around the country" (1982: 42). In March 1975, working from a hotel room in Ojai, California, "The Two" issued their first official "statement," a document that implied the particular forms of alienation experienced by both Applewhite and Nettles, and which presaged the more complex theology they would develop in Heaven's Gate. At that point, their nascent group was known as Human Individual Metamorphosis (HIM), and Nettles issued their first statement while Applewhite was in jail on charges of automobile theft.

Key to understanding the often complex and convoluted theology that developed over the 25 years of Heaven's Gate is the concept that the transition from the earthly plane to the "Kingdom of Heaven" is not spiritual, but physical. Indeed, just five weeks before the suicides, one of those who made the exit wrote, "Our message is not now, nor has it ever been, religious or spiritual" (Anlody 1997). In their first statement,

Applewhite and Nettles followed in the footsteps of many religious leaders and asserted that the majority of religious traditions have misunderstood both the basic problem of human existence and its solution. Instead, they taught that "a human who seeks only to become a member of his next evolutionary kingdom may become a member of that kingdom if he completely overcomes all the aspects and influences of the human level providing he has found favor with a member of that next level who will direct him through his metamorphosis" (Ti and Do 1975). In a tradition not unlike many of the gnostic faiths that have appeared over the past two millennia, transcendence is a function of losing that which links one to the human plane – typically the physical body. "A member of the next kingdom," write Ti and Do (1975), "finds favor with one who is willing to endure all of the necessary growing pains of weaning himself totally from his human condition."

In gnostic fashion, this also indicates a training process to which participants must subject themselves, an initiation into the mysteries of individual metamorphosis facilitated by a "member of that next level" with whom the student has "found favor." It is as though each potential candidate must be apprenticed by one who has already made the transition from one plane of existence to the next. Despite the religious language and imagery drawn from the book of Revelation, and despite their explicit interpretation of Jesus Christ as "an individual of that next kingdom" (Ti and Do 1975), throughout the group's history Applewhite and Nettles regarded their process as fundamentally educational. Based on religious upbringings they could not escape, they regarded the concept of "religion" as intrinsically linked to a salvation that depended on faith in the benevolence of a merciful God. This was not how they came to view the transition to the "Kingdom Level," and they drew instead on the educational paradigm of human evolution that suffuses the New Age movement. Thus, for Ti and Do education, not faith, was the engine of transformation and salvation. They became teachers, their followers students, and the process one of growth through learning the inner truths of reality.

One aspect of North American culture with which many iterations of the New Age subculture have had to deal, indeed which is almost impossible to ignore, is the person of Jesus. While a few have rejected him outright, many proponents of New Age thought and practice have reinterpreted his life and mission, recasting him from the savior adored by millions of Christians to an elder brother, a fellow traveler, a teacher come to reveal the inner secrets of universe. Like other new religious leaders we have considered in this book, Applewhite and Nettles believed that they were sent

to carry on Jesus' message, "to restate the truth Jesus bore, restore its accurate meaning, and again show that any individual who seeks that kingdom will find it through the same process" (Ti and Do 1975).

The Two's interpretation of Jesus both draws on their own religious background and connects their message to a number of socially dominant themes of the time. While many Christian denominations were experiencing a substantial decline in the early 1970s, Jesus as the archetypal religious figure was no less popular than he had ever been. As well, the notion of "gods from outer space" was hardly new. Though *New York Times* reporter James Phelan wrote at the time that "flying-saucer tales long ago ceased to be news" (1976), the work of Eric von Däniken, a Swiss writer who more than anyone popularized the notion that ancient religious scriptures and sacred structures betray evidence of extraterrestrial visitation, was still extremely popular in the New Age "seeker" subculture within which The Two moved and from which many of their followers were drawn.

Applewhite and Nettles, who at the time also called themselves Bo and Peep, came to national attention in the fall of 1975. After a series of meetings with various New Age groups in California, Colorado, and Washington, something unprecedented happened at a September meeting in Waldport, Oregon. Teaching that all who want to make the transition to the next level must participate in an "overcoming process" and divest themselves of all ties to their earthly life, more than 30 people "disappeared" following the meeting and left to join The Two. The story made national news, appearing in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, on national news wires, and the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite. Though the news reports stated that many of these people "gave away everything … property, automobiles, boats and money" (Phelan 1976), sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor – who joined the group covertly shortly after the Waldport meeting and whose work on Heaven's Gate while it was active remains definitive – contend that most members already had few possessions and were predisposed to a nomadic, "seeker" lifestyle (Balch and Taylor 1977).

While camping with Applewhite and Nettles, followers (students) engaged in what was known as the Process, the principal practice of the group at the time. Among other things, this involved confronting and renouncing all the various ties that held the student to the earthly or human level. Many changed their names, a common practice among converts to high commitment religious movements. Working in pairs to which they were assigned by Applewhite and Nettles, the students concentrated on two main activities: "communing," which meant establishing a mental connection with a member of the next level, and developing

"friction" between dyadic partners as a means to identify and reject restrictive human traits and qualities. Encouraged to devote all of their time and energy to these pursuits, students were also instructed to seek neither sexual relationship nor friendship with their dyadic partners (Balch and Taylor 1977).

By late 1976, Applewhite and Nettles had further refined the education metaphor, now referring to their teaching process as a "classroom." As an aid to identifying the various constraints and restrictions students encountered while engaged in the Process, they provided "The 17 Steps," a series of questions meant to highlight the various problems of the human level which the Process was designed to overcome. "Can you follow instructions without adding your own interpretation?" reads the first question (Heaven's Gate 1976). "Are you physically clumsy," asked another, "breaking things because you handle them too harshly or carelessly?" Or, on the other hand, "are you gentle, simple, cautious, and thoughtfully restrained in your steps and all other physical actions or words?" Clearly, many of the questions were meant to illuminate those qualities that needed to be corrected in order to transition to the next level, while others highlighted desirable qualities in potential candidates. According to Balch, who at the time found it hard to believe that anyone would continue with the Process, in an attempt to forestall defection from the group Applewhite and Nettles introduced stricter and stricter regimentation, particularly as it affected control of information. "The only valid information about the process," he wrote years later, "flowed in a direct line from the Father to Peep [Nettles] to Bo [Applewhite] and then to their followers" (Balch 1995: 154).

By 1988, restrictions in the classroom had increased even further, and Applewhite and Nettles refined their beliefs to answer more and more questions about the Next Level. By this time, they had given up their strictly nomadic lifestyle, and rented houses using money supplied by new converts. In the spring of that year, students were issued a list of major and minor offenses, "additional guidelines for learning control and restraint" (Heaven's Gate 1988b). While the major offenses were "deceit," "sensuality," and disobedience, enforcement of the more than 30 lesser offenses carefully regulated the lifestyle of students in Ti and Do's classroom. Students were forbidden, for example, from "taking any action without using my check partner" (#1), and from "trusting my own judgment – or using my own mind" (#2). Responding to fellow classmates or their two teachers negatively, critically, or defensively was forbidden. Offenses such as "picking and choosing certain tasks" (#15) and "having likes or dislikes"

(#16) sought to foster an attitude of equanimity in what many have described as the quasi-monastic atmosphere of the group. In addition to the platonic relationships that existed between "check partners," group members also adopted an androgynous appearance, believing this reflected the lack of sexual distinction in the Next Level. Some of the male members even went so far as to have themselves surgically castrated.

Recruitment and Social Organization in Heaven's Gate

Although the precise activities of the group for much of the period between 1975 and 1992 remain a mystery, the broad outlines of its development have been explored most thoroughly by Robert Balch and David Taylor. Three aspects of this development are particularly significant: (i) the recruitment process and the challenge it presents to more accepted theories of new religious affiliation; (ii) the routinization of group life that addressed issues of factionalism and defection; and (iii) the death of Bonnie Nettles ("Ti"), which shifted the group's orientation in terms of transition to the Next Level.

For many years, a staple of both sociological and anticult theorizing about the recruitment and affiliation processes in new religions has been the concept of ingroup and outgroup ties, or "cult affective bonds" (Lofland and Stark 1965). Put simply, all other things being equal, when relationships within the group become stronger and more meaningful for potential members than relationships outside, the balance is tipped in favor of affiliation. Rather than the acceptance of particular belief structures, sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge maintain that "social networks play an essential role in recruitment to cults, sects, and conventional denominations" (1985: 322). Anticult activists have regularly condemned such practices as "love-bombing" (Unification Church) and "flirty fishing" (Children of God/The Family) as deceptive and deviant strategies for recruiting new members because they allegedly manufacture these cult affective bonds under false pretenses. Practices such as these, however, are really only different in degree, but not in kind, from the kind of affection displayed toward potential members by any number of traditional religious groups.

Balch and Taylor, however, argue that though the recruitment process into Heaven's Gate "was highly structured"(1977: 844), it differs significantly from the model presented by Stark and Bainbridge and, indeed, presents a serious challenge to it. As they describe the process, there was

no overt proselytization, little or no personalized evangelism, and public meetings were arranged on an ad hoc basis. During these meetings, a very brief presentation of the group's key beliefs was followed by a question-and-answer period, after which those who seemed suitably interested were invited to a second meeting, which was usually held in a different location the next day. Indeed, contrary to the often exaggerated extroversion that marks the recruitment strategies of many new religions, the UFO group seemed all but hermetically sealed. After the initial meeting, potential new members "would be asked to leave their names and phone numbers so that they could be contacted later that night. During the first meeting, the location of the follow-up would be kept secret to prevent curiosity seekers from showing up the next day" (Balch and Taylor 1977: 844).

If potential members chose to pursue affiliation further, and if they were invited to do so, they were given the location of a "buffer camp" (Balch and Taylor 1977: 845) where they could learn more about the group. Even there, this took place in a very informal way. Rather than embarking on a program of systematic indoctrination, new members were left largely on their own, tuning in to the Next Level as they felt able, and working through the initial stages of the new relationship with their "check partners." As Balch and Taylor conclude, contrary to the tactics deployed by many other new religions, "the most significant feature of Bo and Peep's recruitment strategy was the way it limited interaction between members of the cult and potential recruits. Virtually all such interaction was confined to stereotyped encounters at the two public meetings" (Balch and Taylor 1977: 845).

Faced with factionalism, declining group morale, and a rising defection rate, by mid-1976, when the UFO group was camped in a remote part of Wyoming, Applewhite and Nettles introduced measures both to solidify the commitment of the remaining members and to create a deeper sense of insulation from the "human level." Balch (1995: 154–155; cf. Davis 2000) describes how the larger camp was broken up into smaller units called "star clusters," each one named for a particular constellation, and how the popular language of UFOs came to pervade the daily life of group members. The campground parking area became the "docking zone," for example, and, for members who "were being bothered by spirits," a "decontamination zone" was established some distance from the main camp (Balch 1995: 155).

While recruitment was informal at best, camp life for the UFO group was highly routinized, with members tuning in to the Next Level and changing tasks every 12 minutes. In an effort to homogenize the group

and to eliminate the distinctiveness of their different bodily "vehicles," Applewhite and Nettles also instituted uniforms. Balch reports that "although styles changed, the typical outfit included a nylon windbreaker, a hood with cloth-mesh eyes and gloves in winter" (1995: 156). Although some of these measures may seem absurd to outsiders, they apparently had the desired effect. As Balch concludes, after the introduction of these measures, "factionalism disappeared, conformity increased, and the defection rate dropped precipitously" (1995: 162).

Early in their UFO careers, Applewhite and Nettles, as God's endtime prophets, expected to be assassinated then resurrected. During the "classroom" years, from 1976 to 1985, they taught that transition to the Next Level would be accomplished physically, not spiritually or metaphysically. This belief was shaken in 1985 when Nettles died suddenly of liver cancer. Applewhite was now alone for the first time in more than a decade, and Nettles's death was arguably the single most significant test of the prophetic bond between him and his followers. Though likely confused and devastated by the loss of his platonic life-partner, Applewhite and the group quickly interpreted her death in terms of the beliefs they had evolved over the past several years. Cancer was merely the physical manifestation of the stress that existed "due to the gap between her Next Level mind and the vehicle's genetic capacity" (Heaven's Gate 1988a). That is, through her own ongoing communion with the Next Level, Nettles's mind had actually evolved to the point where her body could no longer function adequately as a container for it. Three significant factors in the development of the group emerged from Nettles's death.

First, according to the "'88 Update," "Do [Applewhite] has been experiencing the role of having to communicate mentally with her, his Older Member, in a strengthening opportunity for mental or telepathic communication" (Heaven's Gate 1988a). That is, for the UFO group, the one they knew as "Ti" had not actually died, but had successfully transitioned to the Next Level, and continued to communicate with them from that plane. Thus, her death was interpreted not as a failure or a malfunction, but as solid evidence for the correctness of their beliefs.

Second, since Nettles now functioned as Applewhite's "Older Member" in the Next Level, which made the connection to that level rather more direct than it had been, attunement could not but be more meaningful for the group. "The class has witnessed Ti's mind meshed in Do's thinking," reads the "'88 Update," "and even his choice of words as he talks to them" (Heaven's Gate 1988a). No longer were group members waiting to transition through the interest and agency of unknown entities from the

Next Level; now it was their beloved teacher who waited to greet them in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Third, building on this sense of special connection to the Next Level, Applewhite's teachings after Nettles's death significantly increased the social encapsulation of the group. In addition to the regimentation that governed group behavior and the general separation they enjoyed from larger society, Applewhite taught that their beliefs were qualitatively different than those with which they might easily be confused. His mental communication with Nettles, for example, was "not to be confused with the popular conception of channeling or spiritualism" (Heaven's Gate 1988a). Though the group lived as separate from the larger society as possible, they were clearly aware of the spiritual and religious currents around them, and did not want to be confused with other purveyors of New Age messages and spirituality.

The Evolutionary Level Above Human: New Religions, Violence, and the Media

In many ways, because of Heaven's Gate's reclusive nature, the vision of the unseen order offered by this group is less detailed than the narratives constructed by many other new religions. Briefly, though, members believed that the universe is populated by a multitude of other intelligent beings, who exist at various levels of intellectual, spiritual, and physical development. Like some other groups, Heaven's Gate interpreted the Bible in part as a record of extraterrestrial activities during primordial times. Humans were placed on Earth by these extraterrestrials, who are described in only the most general terms, who live on another planet, and who are referred to simply as the Next Level. Through a process of progressive revelation, members of Heaven's Gate came to understand themselves as an elite group, as actual members of the Next Level who had been placed on Earth as an "Away Team." Their mission was to gather together all who would accept their message, and train them to shed their human characteristics so that they would be capable of joining in the cosmic journey home and reassuming their true identities.

Heaven's Gate was only marginally successful at recruiting new members, and then only for a brief period. Through most of its history, the movement was small, reclusive, and in decline. In a very real sense, they were socially encapsulated – primarily engaged in distancing themselves from conventional society, and exploring their identification with life on

the Next Level. For Heaven's Gate members, the liberating voyage they undertook – which outsiders denigrated as suicide – was the last, logical step in demonstrating their convictions about what lies beyond Earth and the mortal existence earthbound life embodies.

Because the group was so private and non-confrontational, however, outsiders were completely unprepared for the discovery of the expended vessels of the 39 members of the "Away Team" in late March 1997. This created an interpretive lacuna that the media by necessity had to fill. This problem was only exacerbated by the relatively non-violent manner in which the Heaven's Gate "Away Team" chose to make its final exit. That is, the images and what we might call the "cult imaginary" with which Western audiences were used to being confronted – the burning Branch Davidian residence, for example, or the bodies at Jonestown strewn along the duckboards – simply did not apply. Indeed, these images were confronted by the highly ritualized and seemingly peaceful way in which the suicides proceeded. Yet, some explanation was required. Faced with such a dramatic rejection of life in conventional society, with no core group members left to interview, and with few surviving records, how was the story of Heaven's Gate to be told?

"Death in a Cult," ran the unsurprising banner headline for a nine-part series in the *New York Times* a day after the story broke. In Britain, *The Times* reported that a "Rich mansion hid temple of doom for sinister order," while, a day later, *The Mirror* characterized the "Away Team" as the "smiling disciples of mad killer 'from outer space'." "Web of Death" headlined one *Newsweek* article two weeks later, while in Canada *Maclean's* presented readers with "Killer Cults" and "Doom Sects," the latter leading with a quote from Matthew 24:11: "And many false prophets shall arise, and shall deceive many" (Fennell and Branswell 1997).

As we noted in the previous chapter, when violence intersects with a new religion in any significant way, media are faced with the problem of representing very complex events in a manner that is quick, concise, unambiguous, and shaped by particular editorial perspectives. Reports are often forced to conform to the requirements and limitations of a particular medium, a problem which is only exacerbated by the lack of experience the majority of journalists bring to religion stories in general, and to new religious stories specifically. Thus, in situations such as Heaven's Gate, media often resort to a form of journalism by analogy, and press other supposedly similar intersections into service as an explanatory mechanism. Not infrequently, these are presented as a kind of timeline, beginning with the Peoples Temple suicides in November 1978 and ending with whatever

is the most recent event. Stripped of nuance and void of interpretation, this timeline is often little more than a collection of dates, numbers of dead, and perhaps an iconic image or two – the hundreds of bodies on the ground at Jonestown, the Branch Davidian residence in flames, the enigmatic face of Asahara Shoko following Aum Shinrikyo's 1995 gas attack on the Tokyo subway. The less-than-subtle, though less-than-accurate media message is that all these events exist along some kind of new religious continuum, that the violence represented is comparable and that it happened for similar reasons. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When the Heaven's Gate "Away Team" made their exits, and news audiences were confronted with images of corpses being removed from the rented mansion or shroud-draped bodies lying on simple cots, media once again appropriated a monolithic and uncritical "cults and violence" trope in an attempt to explain the deaths. Conceptually and literally, the UFO group was linked to a number of other dramatic denouements that are popularly associated with new religions and violence, and became part of an oversimplified history of "cult-related deaths."

When media invoke the "cults and violence" trope, they all but inevitably obscure the theological, psychological, and sociological complexities of the group, reducing them to simple types, easily grasped in the context of a brief news item or sound bite, but far from adequate for explaining either the group or its behavior. With respect to the two cases of dramatic denouement presented in this book, both Heaven's Gate and the Branch Davidians believed they were living in the last days of history, and each considered its group central to the Endtimes scenario. In this sense, both groups were acting out the fulfillment of prophecy – the Branch Davidians that they would be attacked by the forces of Satan in the last days, Heaven's Gate that they would be evacuated from the earth before Hale–Bopp "recycled" the planet. Yet, to suggest that these events are comparable beyond this is to ignore virtually everything else about them, but for the fact that people died.

Adopting the "cults and violence" trope also allowed the media to ignore the external complexities of the situation in which the group found itself, the very situation that led to the dramatic denouement and brought them to media attention in the first place. Although they chose to live in isolation from much of society and while they expected that they would be persecuted for their beliefs, members of Heaven's Gate continued to function as reasonably productive citizens. They operated a successful web design business out of the mansion, and were under neither suspicion nor investigation. As they approached the moment of their exits, members

took time to record farewell messages for their family and friends, to assure them that their choice to join Ti in the Evolutionary Level Above Human was precisely that – their choice. Unlike the tragedy at Waco, there were no children involved, and, helping each other over the course of three days, members made their exit in as painless a way as possible. As Catherine Wessinger describes it (2000: 230–231):

> On the first day, fifteen believers consumed pudding or applesauce mixed with phenobarbitol, drank vodka, and, with assistance, pulled plastic bags over their heads. The surviving members removed the plastic bags and draped each body with a purple shroud. On the next day, fifteen more died in the same manner. Then seven more committed suicide, assisted by two women. The bodies of the final two were found with the plastic bags still on their heads.

As should be obvious by now, there are vast differences between the siege and conflagration at Ranch Apocalypse and the highly ritualized suicides at Rancho Santa Fe nearly four years later. Unfortunately, in the media rush to present the story fast enough and simply enough to keep viewers from switching channels or clicking someone else's link, these differences are rarely recognized, let alone explained.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, employing the "cults and violence" trope left audiences with no plausible explanation for why other new religious movements with similar patterns of belief, and which may have undergone similar prophetic pressure and social encapsulation, have not come to a dramatic conclusion in the same fashion. There have been many such instances, and predictions of an impending apocalypse have been common fare in a number of religious traditions. For example, the leader of the UFO group Chen Tao, also known as "God's Salvation Church" and the "God Saves the Earth Flying Saucer Foundation," predicted that God would descend to earth in human form on March 31, 1998. More to the point, God would arrive at precisely 10:00 a.m., and appear at 3513 Ridgedale Drive in Garland, Texas (Chen 1997: 74–78). In the wake of the Heaven's Gate suicides, this very specific prediction led to concern that a similar mass suicide was imminent should the prophecy fail. No such suicides occurred, and, despite the failure of his prophecy, Hon-ming Chen vowed that he would continue to lead his group.

Violence in any social situation is rarely the result of only one or two causal factors, and this is clearly so in cases of collective religious violence. As our examination of the Heaven's Gate and Branch Davidian

denouements demonstrates, reducing intersections of religion and violence to explanations of convenience is problematic at best, promoting superficial comparisons between events based on stereotypical qualities. Not only does this strategy diminish our understanding of complex events, these interpretations penetrate the culture and perpetuate the stereotype. In the cases at hand, the conflagration at Waco created uneasiness among Heaven's Gate members, who thought they too might be under surveillance, and this was factored into their decision to separate themselves further from conventional society. The destruction of the Branch Davidian community by federal agents was also a motivating factor in the subsequent bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by Timothy McVeigh. On the other hand, as Benjamin Zeller has written, in the case of Heaven's Gate, whose "members had expected government forces of other Luciferian agents to kill them," it was "the absence of any overt oppression that led adherents to decide they had to end their own lives" (2014: 198). As we have seen, though, once the violent cult trope becomes part of the cultural stock for interpreting conflicts between new religions and the social order, there is a much greater likelihood that it will shape rather than explain precisely those kinds of events that create for us the greatest interpretive challenge. This does leave the question hanging, though: Why suicide, and why then? While Zeller notes that arguments about the timing remain inconclusive, the Heaven's Gate Away Team ultimately chose suicide as their exit strategy "because their dualistic theology had long led them to view this act as a possible necessity; their model of graduation from the human world required that they take some step to depart; and the combination of a *lack* of government persecution and the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet and its related publicity served to force the issue" (Zeller 2014: 198).

Researching Heaven's Gate

When the 39 members of Heaven's Gate made their exit from our plane of existence, even those who had studied Ti and Do for years were uncertain initially if the suicides in Rancho Santa Fe were the same group. When it became clear that they were, however, the search for explanations began in earnest. One of those explanations, which made it into both the media and the scholarly literature, was social fear about the influence of the Internet. Remember that this was 1997, which may not seem that long

ago, but in terms of technological development and social penetration of the Internet is a very long time indeed. In 1997, the World Wide Web as most people know it today was only a few years old and Web browsers such as Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator had been available for less than two years. Broadband access, wi-fi, handheld devices, social media, and smartphones—all these were still years away. And at that time, relatively few people had reliable Internet access. Because of this, most people knew very little about the Internet—and even less than that about how it might influence social behavior.

Within days of the suicides, but with no evidence to support his contentions, self-proclaimed cult expert Rick Ross told the *New York Times* that "the Internet has proven a powerful recruitment tool for cults" and that "Heaven's Gate was emblematic of a growing number of small, computer-connected cults that have flourished in the last decade" (quoted in Markoff 1997: A20). Evangelical Christian apologist Tal Brooke told *Newsweek* that "the Net can be an effective cult recruiting tool" (Levy 1997: 46). Most of this media alarmism, however, was based on little more than circumstantial evidence: the Heaven's Gate group had a web site; they operated a modest Web design business and participated in online discussion forums – though most of their contributions were "greeted with scorn and derision" (Miller 1997: 27).

Although, as Cowan has argued, claims of Internet recruitment into Heaven's Gate constituted an entirely manufactured crisis (Cowan 2011a), use of the Internet as both a research site and a research tool in the study of new religions is now unavoidable. That is, most new religious movements have some presence in cyberspace – in many cases a quite elaborate presence, in others rudimentary – and the Internet can be a valuable means for understanding not only the group itself but how it chooses to present itself to outsiders, and how others react to it. Through the Internet, researchers can track both the groups themselves and countermovements that may emerge to challenge them.

When researching NRMs on the Internet, we must be mindful of two principal approaches and two important caveats. First, obviously, we can use the Internet as tool for research: searching for news reports *about* a particular group through such portals as Factiva or Lexis-Nexis, performing a literature review using online databases of scholarly articles and essays, or simply finding online resources related to our topic – "Googling" the topic. In this way, we learn what others have said about the group, in the case of this chapter, Heaven's Gate, and, more importantly, how our research might contribute to that understanding.

Second, though, and often much more interesting, the Internet can be the *site* for one's research. That is, how does this group or that utilize the Internet? Is it only for communication or sharing information among members – what has become known as "religion online"? Or are there practical aspects, ritual practices, for example, that take place in the online environment – that is, is it "online religion"? In this approach, we are looking at how the group itself uses the World Wide Web and, in some cases, how others react to it. As we noted above, Heaven's Gate sought to recruit members from online discussion forums, but were considered such poor "netizens" that few, if any, took them seriously. Certainly, there is no evidence that anyone joined the group for their final exit as a result of online interaction. Through discussion forums, social media, and dedicated web site access, we have the opportunity do participant observation in the online environment. This leads us, however, to the first caveat: the temptation to covert research.

An old adage about the Internet is that no one really knows who anyone else is when we are online, a problem which raises the issue of deception in online research. As we note earlier in this chapter, some of the initial research into Heaven's Gate was conducted covertly, with researchers pretending to be potential group members. Although, now, it is unlikely that institutional ethics review boards would permit such research, the temptation to pretension online is still problematic. It is ridiculously easy to invent an identity when participating in discussion forums or social media. Responsible researchers, however, both disclose their identities and obtain informed consent from their subjects throughout the life of research project. Without this, research subjects can feel, quite reasonably, abused and exploited, their deeply held beliefs treated as little more than stepping stones to academic success.

The second caveat – in the online world, context is crucial – is equally important. In the immediate wake of the suicides and for some time thereafter, mainstream media, dedicated countermovements, and even some academics assumed that, because Heaven's Gate was involved on the Internet, the World Wide Web played some dire role in the group's demise. This illustrates the problem of context. Just as we cannot (or, at least, ought not) excerpt a passage from a book or an article without considering it in context, researchers must be particularly careful about making claims based on problematic research methods. For example, a number of researchers have sought to establish the importance of this new religion or that simply by keying in the name and recording the number of search engine hits returned. In terms of Heaven's Gate, for example, how would

one know if this refers to the group itself, a countermovement criticism, or the Warren Beatty film of the same name? Online, as off-, context is everything (see Cowan 2011b).

Further Reading on UFO Groups

(Note: Because there are only a few book-length scholarly resources on Heaven's Gate, we have also included entries that consider the broader range of UFO groups, many of which include chapters on Heaven's Gate.)

Chryssides, George, ed. *Heaven's Gate*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011.

Festinger, Leon, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956.

Lewis, James R., ed. *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions From Outer Space*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Lewis, James R., ed. *Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003.

Palmer, Susan J. *Aliens Adored: Raël's UFO Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Partridge, Christopher, ed. *UFO Religions*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Tumminia, Diana. *When Prophecy Never Fails: Myth and Reality in a Flying-Saucer Group*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Wessinger, Catherine. *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate*. New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2000.

Zeller, Benjamin E. *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.

Chapter 9

Wicca and Witchcraft: Confronting Age-old Cultural Fears

> *Witches are neither fools, escapists nor superstitious. They are living in the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages, and they accept the fact without reservation; if they do tend to have a keener sense of historical continuity, and a broader time canvas, than most people, that makes their awareness of the present more vivid, not less. Many witches are scientists or technicians, and in our experience often very good ones. If modern Witchcraft did not have a coherent rationale, such people could only keep going by a kind of deliberate schizophrenia, with neither watertight compartment of their lives particularly happy – and we have seen no signs of that.*
>
> Janet and Stewart Farrar, *The Witches' Way*

Modern Witches may be completely secure in their beliefs, as Janet and Stewart Farrar note in the epigraph above, but much of late modern society remains decidedly ambivalent in its portrayal of and attraction to Witches and Witchcraft. On the one hand, modern Paganism is a growing family of religious movements, the most prominent of which include Wicca, Witchcraft, Druidry, and Ásatrú, or Norse Heathenism. Modern Pagan books and magazines proliferate in both specialty shops and large chain bookstores such as Barnes and Noble or online at Amazon.com. Popular television programs such as *Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portray Wiccans and Witches as superheroes, superhuman forces for goodness and truth. Whether influenced by pop culture, or by a deeper resonance with the principles and beliefs that lie at the heart of modern Paganism, more and more Pagan practitioners are "stepping out of the broom closet" and taking their place on the late modern religious stage.

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History, Second Edition. Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley.
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On the other hand, stereotypical representations of witches as evil, old hags bent on destruction remain a steady component of Hallowe'en celebrations and Hollywood horror cinema. Drawing on a 500-year history of misrepresentation, Witches and Wiccans are often accused of worshiping Satan at worst, or of being unwittingly in league with the Devil at best. Though many evangelical Christian opponents of modern Paganism are careful to point out that Wiccans and Witches do not explicitly worship Satan, Christian countercult propaganda remains firmly grounded in the dogma that the Devil lies at the heart of all Pagan belief and practice. Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, Pagans continue to exist in what amounts to a state of low-intensity conflict with the surrounding culture, and occasionally face more overt persecution for "offenses" that range from reading a book on Wicca at school to wearing a pentagram in one's workplace, and from simply professing their belief in Witchcraft to official accusations of spellcasting and black magic (see Barner-Barry 2005). For many Pagans, "the old ways die hard" is an adage that cuts both ways: it offers them a mythistorical grounding for modern belief and practice at the same time it sustains a prejudice against them dating back millennia.

Modern Paganism is an eclectic family of religious traditions, some of which claim to be hundreds of years old, others of which freely admit to more recent pedigree. Despite their many differences, however, most modern Pagans are joined together by three broadly construed principles: belief in the sacredness of nature, belief in the immanence of divinity, and belief in a Pagan's ability to interact with the subtle processes and energies by which the universe is established and maintained. Since we do not have the space to give an adequate account of all (or even most) modern Paganisms, this chapter will concentrate on the most visible members of the modern Pagan family – Wicca and modern Witchcraft, both of which are also known as the Craft. It is worth pointing out that these terms are not strictly synonymous, and many practitioners describe the difference as "all Wiccans are Witches, but not all Witches are Wiccans."

Gerald Gardner and the Origins of Modern Witchcraft

Whatever its claims to an ancient origin, modern Witchcraft and the emergence of Wicca as a distinct religious movement within it begins with a retired British civil servant named Gerald Brosseau Gardner (1884–1964). After a varied and largely uneventful career in southeast Asia, during

which he managed a tea plantation and served as customs inspector for the British government in Malaysia, Gardner and his wife, Donna, returned to England in 1936, settling in the New Forest area near the south coast. An amateur archeologist and ardent folklorist, he quickly became associated with a local group of occultists called the Fellowship of Crotona, and through them began to explore the area's various Witchcraft legends. In particular, the work of Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1863–1963) convinced him that there were covens of traditional Witches still functioning in England (see Murray 1921, 1931). Gardner claims to have been initiated into just such a coven in September 1939, on the eve of World War II, by a woman named Dorothy Clutterbuck. Indeed, Wiccan lore maintains that both Gardner and Clutterbuck were involved in what has become known among modern Pagans as "Operation Cone of Power," a number of rituals allegedly conducted by covens of Witches to prevent by magic Hitler's planned invasion of Great Britain (Heselton 2000: 226–260). According to historian Ronald Hutton, "this dramatic episode became Gardner's favorite story about the coven" (1999: 208), and the myth on which part of the Walt Disney classic, *Bed-knobs and Broomsticks*, is loosely based.

By the late 1940s, Gardner had gained considerable experience as a Witch and was beginning to have his own ideas about whether or not modern Witchcraft, or Wicca as he began to call it, should remain a secretive mystery religion, or come out of the shadows of the New Forest and into the light of modern day. When other New Forest Witches disagreed, Gardner left the group to form his own coven. In 1948, he moved to the Isle of Man, and eventually took over as Director of the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft in Castletown. Following the repeal of the last of the British Witchcraft Acts in 1951 and the death of Dorothy Clutterbuck, Gardner felt free to present the "Old Religion" to a more popular audience. Though he had published a fictional account of Wiccan belief and practice under the pseudonym Scire in 1949, in 1954 he published the groundbreaking *Witchcraft Today* under his real name, followed by *The Meaning of Witchcraft* in 1959. In addition to his willingness to talk with the media about his beliefs, these books firmly established Gardner as the first public face of modern Witchcraft. "Unlike a number of sensational writers," he declared in *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, "I do not wish to convey the impression that there are witches at work in every corner of the land. On the contrary, there are very few real witches left, and those keep themselves very much to themselves" (Gardner [1959] 2004: 5). They did not keep to themselves for long, however, at least not those who became interested in the oldest of new religious movements in Great Britain.

Shortly before the publication of *Witchcraft Today*, Gardner initiated Doreen Valiente (1922–1999) into his coven, and her skill both as a Wiccan practitioner and as a writer helped shape what became known as Gardnerian Witchcraft. For many years, Gardner collected magical and ritual resources from a wide range of groups and traditions. He already had the material gathered from Margaret Murray about Witchcraft as the alleged survival of an ancient fertility religion. Through his association with the Fellowship of Crotona, he gained access to the ceremonial writings of occult groups such as the Rosicrucians and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He became friends with Aleister Crowley just prior to the latter's death in 1947. Indeed, Gardner claims that Crowley initiated him into the Ordo Templi Orientis and chartered him to found his own chapter of Crowley's magical order. Though Gardner never acted on the charter, aspects of Crowley's magical beliefs and ritual practice clearly influenced his reformulation of modern Witchcraft and Wicca. All of these resources Gardner gathered into various Books of Shadows, his working collections of magical and ritual texts. In her analysis of what may be Gardner's first Book of Shadows, which was apparently discovered behind a filing cabinet in his library at the Witchcraft Museum, folklorist Sabine Magliocco notes that Gardner seems to have gone to great lengths to craft an "ancient" manuscript to serve his ancient religion:

> It appears that Gardner went to great pains to make this manuscript look like his idea of a medieval grimoire: he bound a number of sheets of paper into a leather cover taken from another book, the contents of which he had removed. The writing on the leather cover and in parts of the book itself is done in careful calligraphy. Some words are misspelled, perhaps intentionally, to make them appear archaic, or perhaps as a result of copier's errors. (Magliocco 2004: 53; cf. Hutton 1999: 227–232).

Acting both as his secretary and his High Priestess, Valiente helped Gardner organize his haphazard collection into a coherent magical and ritual text, the Gardnerian Book of Shadows, which has served ever since as the basis of belief and practice for many modern Witchcraft covens.

A ritual and magical literature, however, was not Gardner's only legacy to modern Witchcraft. In addition to Valiente, he initiated a number of Witches who have become known in Wiccan lore as "Gardner's network." These included Monique Wilson (1928–1980?), Gardner's last High

Priestess who went on to found a number of covens in Scotland, and who initiated Raymond Buckland (b.1934), known in the Craft as "Robat" and the man generally credited with bringing Gardnerian Witchcraft to North America in the early 1960s; Patricia Crowther (b.1927) and her husband Arnold (1909–1974), both of whom went on to become prominent spokespersons for modern Witchcraft in Great Britain; Eleanor ("Rae") Bone (1910–2001), who went on to found two English covens; and Jack Bracelin (dates unknown) and his girlfriend, who is known to Wiccan history only as "Dayonis" (Hutton 1999: 249–250), both of whom sought even greater press coverage for their emergent tradition, a campaign that brought them into conflict with many older members of Gardner's network.

This is also not to say that Gardner had no competitors as modern Paganism moved from the shadows into the light. One such was Robert Cochrane (born Roy Bowers; 1931–1966), founder and magister of a coven known as the Clan of Tubal Cain. According to British researcher Ethan Doyle White, Cochrane was part of a loose network of Pagan groups, known as the Traditional Craft, which claimed to trump Gardner's declaration of Wicca's antiquity. That is, they claim descent from even older and more traditional sources than Gardner's groups (White 2011: 205; cf. Hutton 1999: 309–318). Trying to explain the hostility with which Cochrane viewed Gardner and his movement, White illustrates the important issue of competing claims as emerging new religious groups contend for space in the public arena. For example, Cochrane objected to Witches "going into press and making the most ridiculous statements imaginable," such as one Witch who claimed in an interview "that the sun would not rise the next morning if she did not perform her rituals" (White 2011: 209). As well, there were "obvious philosophical differences that existed between the two traditions." Whereas Gardner was more ritually oriented, Cochrane's path was more mystical (White 2011: 210). Not surprising was the "sense of rivalry" between the two men. Put simply, Cochrane was jealous of Gardner's popularity and success (White 2011: 210). Finally, and most intriguing from the perspective of new religions studies, White suggests that Cochrane's hostility could be rooted in ex-member antipathy, that he had been a member of Gardner's group, but left under strained or unpleasant circumstances. It would not be the first time that a disgruntled former member of new (or established) religion set out to do his or her former group one better.

Indeed, another person who at various times claimed Gardnerian initiation was Alex Sanders (1926–1988), founder of the Alexandrian tradition

of British Wicca, who with his wife Maxine (b.1946) were among the best known British Witches in the 1960s and 1970s. Styling himself "King of the Witches," though no such title actually exists, Sanders also claimed descent from an hereditary line of Witches and taught an amalgam of ceremonial magic and popular occultism. At some point, he came into possession of a copy of a Gardnerian Book of Shadows and incorporated that into his system as well. He insisted later that all his magical books had been passed down to him by his grandmother, by whom he was allegedly initiated at the age of seven. Although these claims have been disproven, many of those initiated into the Alexandrian tradition still regard him as a true occult teacher and a powerful Witch (Farrar 1991). Though not as strong or as popular as the Gardnerian, the Alexandrian tradition still continues both in Great Britain and in North America, as does Cochrane's Clan of Tubal Cain.

Social Organization and Development of Modern Witchcraft and Wicca

Like the Alexandrian controversies, considerable dispute surrounds the Gardnerian origins of Wicca. While it seems clear that Dorothy Clutterbuck was a real person, historians have found little concrete evidence that she was involved in local Witch culture, let alone a leader among British covens (cf. Valiente 1984; Hutton 1999: 207–212). Margaret Murray's arguments for the survival of ancient Pagan practices in Great Britain have been seriously challenged by historians and folklorists alike (see Simpson 1994). Pagan critics such as Aidan Kelly (1991) contend that, whatever their sources, Gardner and his colleagues simply created the religion of Wicca for their own purposes, inventing it out of whole cloth, as it were. As Raymond Buckland points out, however, echoing a solid sociological insight, "if Gardner had made up the whole thing, basic idea and all, from scratch, it would not negate Wica [*sic*] as a viable religion today. Its rapid growth around the world attests to its 'rightness' in terms of people's religious needs" (1995: 148). And meeting people's needs it certainly seems to be.

Since emerging in Great Britain in the 1950s and coming to North America in the 1960s, modern Paganism has taken root among a wide variety of people. Thousands of men and women, dissatisfied with dominant institutional religions (especially Christianity), have found a welcome home in the burgeoning fields of modern Pagan ritual and practice. Despite the cultural stigma that still attaches to it, modern Paganism has registered

impressive growth in recent decades, both in terms of its overall population, which some current estimates place at between 800,000 and one million in the United States alone (Clifton 2006: 11), and in terms of the often bewildering number of traditions, lineages, and schools of thought that mark the rapidly expanding boundaries of its belief and practice.

Founded in 1962, for example, and inspired by Robert Heinlein's classic science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the Church of All Worlds (CAW) is one of the oldest modern Pagan organizations in the United States. Two years later, students at Carleton College organized the Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA), which developed into a number of contemporary Druid orders, including Ár nDraiocht Féin (Our Own Druidry) and a variety of "new and improved" RDNA groups. In 1968, Gavin and Yvonne Frost founded the Church and School of Wicca, which became the first mail-order course in Witchcraft available in the United States. Though he claims to have been asked personally by Gerald Gardner to found a coven in the United States and is generally credited with bringing (or taking) Gardnerian Wicca "across the pond," Raymond Buckland has also founded at least two Wiccan traditions of his own – the Seax and PectiWitan – both of which evolved as reactions against infighting among traditional Gardnerian groups. Based in Saxon lore and mythology (though not history, as he is careful to point out), Buckland admits that he simply invented the Seax tradition out of a need for a more personally fulfilling style of Wicca ([1974] 2005). PectiWita, or the Pictish craft, on the other hand, he claims to have learned from an elderly Scot named Aidan Breac (1991).

The search for ancient origins and magical family lineages – both of which are strategies by which new religions seek social and cultural legitimation – has marked the emergence of many modern Paganisms. Numerous Witches, Wiccans, Goddess-worshippers, Asatruar, and Heathens continue the essence of Margaret Murray's survivalist myth and assert powerful Pagan ancestries. Like Alex Sanders, Victor Anderson (1917–2001) also claimed pre-adolescent initiation by his grandmother, and founded the Feri tradition of Wicca in North America. Known also as Faerie or Fairy Wicca, Anderson's school is based on the widespread lore of the "little people" in Britain. One of the best known American witches, Starhawk, was initiated into the Feri tradition in the mid-1970s, and through *The Spiral Dance* (1989), a now-classic text in modern Paganism, greatly influenced the revival of Goddess worship in the United States. Indeed, in response to the increasing interest in modern Paganism and the concomitant demand for ritual, theological, and practical material, modern Witches such as Silver RavenWolf, Edain McCoy, and D.J. Conway have established something of

a cottage industry based around generic, introductory Witchcraft texts marketed primarily to teenagers and young adults (e.g., Conway 1990; RavenWolf 1993, 1998; McCoy 1994).

There are even emergent covens and spiritual working groups that seek to conflate aspects of Wicca and Witchcraft with Christianity, resulting in a form of "ChristoPaganism" that makes both Christians and Pagans alike decidedly uncomfortable (Pittman 2003). Though less numerous, similar attempts are being made to introduce the worship of the Canaanite goddess Asherah into Jewish worship, creating a tradition of JudeoPaganism. It is important to point out that this brief description barely scratches the surface of the wide and varied landscape of modern Paganism as it is now practiced in Great Britain, Europe, and North America.

In Wicca and Witchcraft, the basic social division lies between the coven and the solitary, between those who practice their craft as part of a ritual working group and those who choose to work alone, seeking community only when it suits them. "The coven," writes Starhawk, "is a Witch's support group, consciousness-raising group, psychic study center, clergy training program, College of Mysteries, surrogate clan, and religious congregation all rolled into one" (1989: 35). Covens are usually small, intimate groups – "tradition" says they have no more than 13 members, though many are smaller and quite a few larger, and new members are admitted through prescribed rites of initiation. As a number of Pagan commentators have pointed out, this initiatory process works both to the benefit and the detriment of the Craft. While some covens will only initiate those who have demonstrated a certain level of sincerity and dedication to the training required, others freely initiate any and all who ask, then send them out into the world with no training and no support – only the title of "Witch." In the eyes of many modern Pagans, this practice cannot but weaken and trivialize the Craft. As Cowan notes in *Cyberhenge*, this is the issue of *personal gnosticism*, the belief widespread among modern Pagans that if something "feels right" to the practitioner, then it must be right. This internal certainty has led a number of modern Pagans to proclaim themselves leaders of this group or that, despite no apparent qualification other than this sense of personal gnosticism – a situation that has led to no little conflict in the modern Pagan community (see Cowan 2005: 35–50, *passim*).

Although the Witches' coven is perhaps the best known popular aspect of modern Wicca, as Chas Clifton notes, "most Wiccans are not in groups but are 'solitaries' who may join with other Wiccans only occasionally" (2006: 11), and who do not practice their craft as part of an established

ritual working group. In many cases, there are no nearby covens to which a prospective Witch might apply for initiation and training, while in others, the experience of coven infighting, or "witch wars," as they are often called (Reid 2000), has led initiated Witches or Wiccans to leave group work and continue their practice alone. As modern Paganism has gained in popularity, two major problems face solitaries: lack of acceptance by coveners, who often consider solitaries "second-class Witches," and, in the absence of qualified teachers, a dearth of resources from which to learn their Craft. Both issues have led to a publishing boom in books designed specifically for solitary practice (e.g., Green 1991; Cunningham 1993; RavenWolf 2003). Among the most influential of these is Scott Cunningham's *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (1988). There, Cunningham (1956–1993) declares that modern Witches and Wiccans should

> never feel inferior because you're not working under the guidance of a teacher or an established coven. Don't worry that you won't be recognized as a true Wiccan. Such recognition is important only in the eyes of those giving or withholding it, otherwise it's meaningless. You need only worry about pleasing yourself and developing a rapport with the Goddess and God. (1988: 53–54)

Here, Cunningham clearly demonstrates this foundational principle of personal gnosis, the belief that the immanence of divinity is available to all and that the gods will reward (or at least respond to) all those who seek them with sincere hearts. Philosophically, this form of affective authorization is arguably rooted in "The Charge of the Goddess," part of the opening sabbat (seasonal) and esbat (monthly) rituals for many modern Pagans. Drafted originally by Gardner and Valiente, who worked from a variety of sources, the Charge includes passages from the writings of Aleister Crowley and Charles Leland's *Aradia: The Gospel of the Witches* ([1899] 1974). According to Janet and Stewart Farrar's edition of Gardner's sabbat rituals, at the conclusion of the Charge, the High Priestess, who is speaking in the name of the Goddess, tells the group:

> And thou who thinkest to seek for me, know thy seeking and yearning shall avail thee not unless thou knowest the mystery; that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee. For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning; and I am that which is attained at the end of desire. (Farrar and Farrar 1981: 43)

Beliefs, Rituals, and Practices of Modern Witchcraft and Wicca

Despite the personal gnosticism that ultimately authorizes modern Pagan belief, and despite the differences that almost inevitably emerge as various Pagan schools of thought develop and mature, Witches and Wiccans do hold a number of fundamental principles in common: the sacredness of nature, the immanence of divinity, the ubiquity of energy, and the ability to interact meaningfully with universal processes. Rejecting the dualistic understanding of many other religious groups, modern Witches and Wiccans locate the foundation of their beliefs in the sacredness of nature. For them, the phrase "Mother Earth" is not simply a politically correct euphemism for the planet we share, but a deeply held conviction that the divine is manifest in and through the natural world. Though most modern Pagans live in urban and suburban settings, their reverence for nature expresses itself in a variety of ways – from the manner in which ritual tools should be crafted and herbs gathered to a decided preference for outdoor ritual activity, and from the seasonal timing of those rituals to political action on behalf of a wide range of ecological causes. Indeed, the first of "The Thirteen Principles of Belief," a consensus statement produced in 1973 by the Council of American Witches, states: "We practice Rites to attune ourselves with the natural rhythm of life forces marked by the Phases of the Moon and the Seasonal Quarters and Cross Quarters" (Adler 1986: 102). While many other religious traditions have cordoned off the natural world and erected dualistic fences to keep the spiritual life free from contamination, modern Pagan belief and practice embraces the natural world and seeks a re-enchantment of human life and purpose through a recognition of nature's inherent beauty, worth, and divinity. Indeed, Scott Cunningham writes that "the core of Wicca … is a joyous union with nature" (1988: 6).

Though many modern Pagans have incorporated into their pantheons gods and goddesses from a variety of religious traditions, Witches and Wiccans traditionally express their belief in the immanence of divinity through worship of the Great Goddess and her consort, the Horned God. Known by many names and in many aspects, the Great Goddess represents the divinity of the natural world and her consort the principle of fertility. Modern Pagans recognize that the divine reality in the universe is beyond gender in the sense that humankind understands the concept, but believe that this reality is immanent in the polarity and unity of male and female principles. Together, the Goddess and the God give birth to all that was, is, and ever will be. This duality should not be understood as a strict equality,

however. Many (some would argue most) ritual working groups privilege the Goddess over the God, elevating the female principle of fecundity over the male principle of fertilization. Further, in a move more common among women-only groups, the God has been eliminated from ritual practice entirely.

Within Wiccan traditions that have evolved from Gardnerian and Alexandrian sources, two rituals in particular exemplify the immanence of the divine polarity – Drawing Down the Moon and the Great Rite. According to many Pagan practitioners, Drawing Down the Moon is one of the most moving and beautiful rites in modern Witchcraft and Wicca. As the rite proceeds, the High Priestess of the coven enters a trance, a state of heightened awareness and openness. During this phase of the ritual, the High Priest kneels before the High Priestess and invokes the Goddess, who is symbolized by the moon, asking that She enter the body of the High Priestess and speak through her to the coven. When the coven wishes to work with the male principle of the divine complementarity, a similar rite though far less frequently practiced, known as Drawing Down the Sun, is performed with the High Priest of the coven.

The Great Rite, on the other hand, is the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage between the Goddess and the God. Enacted either between the High Priestess and her High Priest, or as part of the initiation into the third degree of the Craft, the Great Rite includes sexual intercourse, either symbolic (known as "in token") or actual (known as "in true"). No longer in use in many covens, especially in North America where many groups consider it irredeemably patriarchal, where it is performed the Great Rite is most commonly symbolic, or "in token." When done this way, the High Priest once again kneels before the High Priestess. He elevates the chalice, an ornate cup that is the ritual symbol of the female principle. Standing above him, the High Priestess inserts her athame, her ritual dagger and symbol of the male principle, into the chalice. In the Great Rite, suggest well-known Wiccans Janet and Stewart Farrar, three fundamental components of the Craft are realized:

> First, that the basis of all magical or creative working is polarity, the interaction of complementary aspects. Second, "as above, so below"; we are of the nature of the Gods, and a fully realized man or woman is a channel for that divinity, a manifestation of the God and Goddess (and each in fact manifesting elements of both). And third, that all the levels from physical to spiritual are equally holy. (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 32–33)

Belief in the sacredness of nature and in the immanence of divinity underpins the third foundational principle of Wicca and modern Witchcraft: belief in the ability to interact with the subtle processes and energies by which the universe is established and maintained. To outsiders, this is perhaps the most fascinating and frightening aspect of the Craft – the magic of Witchcraft. Wiccans and Witches define "magic" (which some spell "magick" to distinguish their spellworking from stagecraft and illusion) in a variety of ways. As always, some of these are more useful than others. Cunningham, for example, defines magic as "the projection of natural energies to produce needed effects" (1988: 19). Lisa McSherry, High Priestess of an online cybercoven, concurs: "Magick is the art of consciously directing energy through focused will and effort to affect the things around us" (McSherry 2002: 6). Starhawk considers it as "the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational" (1989: 27). Like Cunningham, McSherry, and Starhawk, many Wiccans and Witches insist that though the energies with which they work may be occult, they are not supernatural. That is, they may have been hidden from popular view by the philosophies of scientific materialism and the restriction of dominant monotheistic religion, but they remain a natural part of the universal order. Humankind in the late modern world has simply forgotten how to access these energies, but through modern Pagan ritual and spellworking can learn, indeed must learn to do so again.

Broadly speaking, ritual observances among Wiccans and Witches follow an intertwined pattern of seasonal festivals and lunar gatherings – the sabbats and the esbats, respectively. Known generally as the Wheel of the Year, these eight seasonal festivals mark the solstices, equinoxes, and the midpoints between, and together symbolize the yearly cycles of death and rebirth. Beltaine, for example, which is also known as *Walpurgisnacht* and May Day, is celebrated on or about April 30, and marks the approach of summer. Its autumnal correlate, Samhain (pronounced "sow-wen"), which is celebrated on October 31, heralds the coming of winter. Yule marks the winter solstice (December 21–22), the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, and symbolizes the divine rebirth, when "the Goddess gives birth to a son, the God" (Cunningham 1988: 65). "In Witchcraft," writes Starhawk, "the celebrations of the Goddess are lunar; those of the God follow the mythological pattern of the Wheel of the Year" (1989: 113).

Esbats, on the other hand, follow the 13-month lunar cycle and are the regular meeting times of many covens, though some groups choose to

meet more than once a month. Where sabbat celebrations are occasionally open to non-members, esbats are a time for teaching, divination, spell-working, and healing, and are generally open only to members of the coven. Because the moon symbolizes the Goddess, full moon esbats are considered especially auspicious for initiations into the Craft, or from one degree of Witchcraft to the next.

However they are practiced among different modern Pagan groups, two basic principles are generally believed to underpin ritual practice and spellworking: the *Wiccan Rede* and the *Rule of Three*. Attributed first to Doreen Valiente, the Wiccan Rede, or rule, is the moral underpinning for much of modern Pagan belief and practice. It states simply: "An it harm none, do as thou wilt." The Rule of Three, on the other hand, provides for the practical effects of one's rituals and spellworking. That is, whether good or ill, whatever one puts out into the world will return threefold. While the Rede clearly draws on John Stuart Mill's utilitarian theory of liberty, the Rule just as clearly resembles the principle of karma to which many Asian traditions hold.

Recognizing that Wicca and Witchcraft are ways of life, however, not simply a collection of rituals and beliefs, and are in this regard little different from other religious traditions, a number of ceremonies and celebrations have developed to mark significant events in the lives of modern Pagans. Wiccanings, for example, are similar to baptism or confirmation in the Christian tradition. At the Wiccaning, a child is both named and dedicated to the Goddess and the God (or the particular pantheon of the coven). Because Wicca and Witchcraft are initiatory traditions, however, Wiccaning does not bind the child to a particular tradition; when she is old enough to speak for herself, she will be both allowed and expected to choose her own path. Handfastings are modern Pagan wedding ceremonies, usually performed by a High Priestess and/or a High Priest in the presence of the couple's friends and family. In some places, this can serve as the legal marriage of the couple, in others it is performed after the couple has been legally married. Traditions for the ceremony vary, but often include such rituals as leaping a broomstick, tying the couple's hands together with consecrated cord, and very occasionally the Great Rite, either in true or in token. Unlike many Christian wedding ceremonies, there is no handfasting commitment "'til death do us part." Rather, handfasting binds the couple together "as long as love shall last." If they reach a time when love no longer lasts, a coven may perform a handparting to symbolize the end of their union.

Although the precise understanding varies from group to group, Witches and Wiccans embrace the wheel of death and rebirth for humankind as

well. Called by different names – the Summerland, the Otherworld, the Isles of the Blessed, the Shining Isle – the plane to which the spirits of the dead go is considered only a temporary stopping place on a journey that continues throughout eternity. To honor those who have crossed over, and to comfort those who remain, Wiccan and Witches hold "crossing over" rituals, invoking the gods and goddesses to whom the deceased was dedicated, and retelling sacred stories of death and rebirth – the myth of Demeter and Persephone, for example, or the Celtic legend of Cerridwen's cauldron, into which all souls return and out of which all are reborn (see Starhawk et al. 1997).

Satanic Panic: The Legacy of Religious Cult Fears

Modern Paganism is a diverse family of religious movements that has reconstructed and reinvented pre-Christian understandings of belief and ritual practice. Despite their diversity, though, the various Pagan strands do share a similar vision of the unseen order. Fundamental to this is the belief that ultimate reality exists and expresses itself through the natural world. Since each person is part of that natural order, each of us is an expression of the divine. As a result, every individual has the capacity to interact with the flow of energy that structures the universe, and to place themselves in harmony with the underlying, ordering rhythms of life and death. However, as we have seen so often in the groups we have discussed in previous chapters, modern Pagans believe that, by and large, humans have been blinded to the reality of their divine nature – this time through the domineering influence of monotheistic religions and scientific materialism. Paganism allows practitioners to reassume and to express their actual divine nature. By tapping into the flow of cosmic energy, practitioners believe that they can consciously direct that energy to influence the world around them.

In seeking to practice their version of the Pagan tradition, Wiccans have come into conflict with ancient doctrines intended to preserve the power of the Christian Church against dissidents, heretics, and practitioners of folk religions who continued their beliefs long after their putative conversion to Christianity. For much of Christian history both Satan and the witch have been used as symbols to mark the boundaries of acceptable belief and practice. Indeed, the *Canon Episcopi* (circa 900 CE), one of the first collections of Roman Catholic canon law and one of the first pronouncements on Witchcraft, stated that anyone who believed in the ability of witches to fly, to influence the weather, or to cure or cause disease was

"beyond doubt an infidel" (Lea 1939: 180). To suggest that they gained their supernatural abilities from some kind of a diabolical pact invested the Devil with far more power over human affairs than the Church was willing to concede. This was the Church's position for over six hundred years, until the middle of the fifteenth century. Toward the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the age of rationalism, however, all that changed and it became Church policy to hunt witches precisely because they *were* believed to be in league with Lucifer. The promulgation of the papal bull *Summus Desiderantes Affectibus* by Innocent VIII in 1484 and the publication of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches") two years later ushered in a Christian hysteria about witches and Witchcraft that was later reflected in the American colonial-era Witchcraft trials (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974).

Since then, as J. Gordon Melton has commented (1986: 76), "The Satanic tradition has been carried almost totally by primarily conservative Christians, who describe the practices in vivid detail in the process of denouncing them." Conservative Christians continue to use Satanism and Witchcraft to demarcate the boundary between safe and dangerous territory, between faith and folly. For example, one well-known Christian fundamentalist described Wicca as "one of the more seductive deceptions Satan has come up with" (Schnoebelen 1990: 7), while another has opined that since "Satanism [is] the oldest non-Christian religion existing in society, Wicca has to be its sibling" (Baker 2004: 160).

Like many other new religions, Wicca became more visible during the 1970s, drawing on the countercultural currents of the time, as well as the developing feminist movement. Although the intensity of the cult controversy that enveloped so many new religions during the 1970s – Unificationism, The Children of God (The Family), Hare Krishna, and Scientology – had begun to wane by the early 1980s, a new cult panic erupted that captured public attention. The Satanism scare swept through North America and Europe during the 1980s, and raised public fears about an underground satanic network that had gained entry into a wide range of organizations and institutions. Most notable among its alleged atrocities was the infiltration of pre-schools and daycare centers for the purpose of sexual abuse of children. In addition, panic-mongers alleged that older women were held captive and used as breeders, their babies seized by Satanists for use in ritual sacrifice. While these claims were soon discredited by scholars who studied the scare (Richardson, Best, and Bromley 1991; Victor 1993; Nathan and Snedeker 1995), a variety of groups were swept up in the moral panic that ensued. While Wicca remained on the

fringe of the Satanism scare, its practice of meeting in wooded locations and its ritual use of pentagrams, ritual daggers, cauldrons, and candles raised Witchcraft fears among the uninformed and blurred distinctions between Satanists and Wiccans.

As a result of the fear of Witchcraft that is so deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, the rise of the Satanism scare and the moral panic that followed, and the increasing visibility of modern Pagans who assert the right to the practice their faith free from interference and stigma, Wiccans today continually face challenges to their legitimacy and, in the United States at least, their First Amendment rights. Public schoolteachers have been suspended for disclosing their Wiccan identity to students, and students have been prohibited from wearing the pentagram, the Wiccan equivalent of a cross, in school. For example, a North Carolina schoolteacher was suspended in 2000 when it became known that she was a practicing Wiccan (Chamberlain 2000) and a high school student was nearly expelled when administrators believed she was casting spells on her teachers (Barner-Barry 2005). Schools also regularly struggle with whether or not to allow Hallowe'en celebrations because evangelical Christians accuse them of promoting Satanism. Witchcraft fears are reflected in the evangelical response to the fabulously popular *Harry Potter* novels, which are prominent on the American Library Association's list of 100 "most challenged books." Because many evangelical Christians believe they lead unsuspecting children into Witchcraft (and by implication Satanism), many want *Harry Potter* removed permanently from library shelves (Dionne 1999), while others have picketed the opening of *Harry Potter* films.

Wiccan workers serving the public have faced similar discrimination. In 1998, for example, after a customer complained, a clerk in a Boston art supply store was reprimanded for wearing a pentagram. "Instantly I was a Satan worshiper," he said, "and was told I could not wear my pentacle out" (Lawrence 1998). Shops selling Wiccan ritual implements have been threatened with violence. Wiccan clergy have been denied equal opportunity to offer opening prayers at public events where such opportunities are rotated among different faith traditions, and they have faced opposition to serving as chaplains in prisons and the military. Prejudice against Wicca continues to complicate the decisions of military leaders. When George W. Bush was campaigning for the presidency in 2000, he responded to the issue of Wiccan clergy in the military and told reporters, "I do not think Witchcraft is a religion, and I do not think it is in any way appropriate for the US military to promote it" (Reuters 2002). A member of the House of Representatives wrote a similar letter of protest to military officials at Fort

Hood, Texas, demanding that the commanding officer rescind permission for Wiccan rituals to be conducted on base (Rosin 1999). Wiccans and Witches in the US military continue to lobby for the right to place pentagrams on the headstones of Pagan soldiers killed in action.

These continuing tensions aside, Wiccans have made considerable progress in gaining social acceptance. Although academics disagree on the nature or depth of the effects, entertainment products such as *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* have presented what we might call pop culture Paganism in the kind of positive light of which other new religions can only dream. Moreover, their largely well-educated, middle-class backgrounds, reverence for nature, and ethic of non-violence make Witchcraft fears considerably less plausible in late modernity, and Pagans have taken a proactive role in educating the public about their various traditions. To correct misinformation, for example, *The Witches' Voice*, one of the most extensive modern Pagan websites on the Internet (www.witchvox.com), provides information on a wide variety of traditions. There have also been a number of symbolic victories. For example, in 2001 the acting Governor of Massachusetts signed a bill into law officially exonerating five women who were executed as witches in Salem in 1692 (LeBlanc 2001). There is considerable evidence that the Wiccan tradition is working its way toward the mainstream of religious practice. Nonetheless, the Wiccan experience also reveals how deeply the notion of dangerous cults is embedded in public consciousness and the cultural stock of knowledge. Even groups that pose little danger to society may find themselves hostage to ancient fears and moral panics that are not of their own making.

Researching Modern Paganism

Despite these advances, perception is still widespread that witches and witchcraft are dangerous. Unfortunately, these perceptions are aggressively promoted by movements such as the Christian countercult, which consistently presents modern Paganism either as a version of Satanism or as a tool of Satan himself. In 2010, for example, a young Missouri woman tried to access information about Wicca on a public computer at her local library. It and other sites related to modern Paganism – but not to Christian countercult sites about Witchcraft and Wicca – were blocked by the library's filter software. When she asked to have the sites unblocked, the librarian told her that they would be unlocked only if the librarian felt the patron had a "legitimate

reason to view the content" and that she "had an 'obligation' to call the 'proper authorities' to report those who were attempting to access blocked sites if she thought they would misuse the information they were attempting to access" (Patrick 2013). Not surprisingly, this concerned the woman greatly. A suit filed on her behalf by the American Civil Liberties Union resolved the issue a couple of years later.

Though heard less often in recent years, rumors still persist of highly organized, subversive, underground Pagan groups that commit horrific acts – particularly around Hallowe'en or as part of ongoing ritual sacrifice. As we write this in 2014, for instance, a young American woman, Miranda Barbour, is claiming to be a member of a satanic cult and a willing participant in more than 20 ritual homicides stretching back several years. There is, however, little credible evidence both for her specific story and for the notion of murderous satanic groups in general, yet modern Paganism continues to be conflated with historical, we might even say hysterical imagery about Witchcraft and Witches. So, how do we overcome this particular prejudice?

Participant observation of modern Pagan groups, such as that conducted by sociologist Helen Berger (1999), Nikki Bado-Fralick (2005), or Tanya Luhrmann (1989), for example, detaches individual and group beliefs from historical mythology and places contemporary practices in their proper cultural contexts. Participant observation involves a number of interrelated techniques. Once access to a group has been gained, which, in terms of modern Paganism, could involve a lengthy vetting process by group members, researchers begin both to *participate* and to *observe* the practices, ritual, and behavior of the coven, circle, or ritual working group. This could involve following the path of an initiate, for example, or participating in rituals only as a guest, in which case some aspects of group life may remained closed to the researcher. While participating and observing, researchers often conduct *surveys* among the group as a whole. This is a very useful way to gather macroscopic data on membership population and careers, the history and evolution of the group, and shifts in leadership over time. Complementing this, researchers can carry out *in-depth personal interviews* with selected members, collecting more microscopic data to flesh out one's project. That is, if the macroscopic data chart the landscape of the group, microscopic data fill in the daily life and experiences of its members. When conducting interviews of this sort, it is important for researchers to approach members at all levels of the organization – new arrivals, seasoned participants, and leadership. Finally, there is *historical research*, time spent studying whatever passes for archives in the group. This could mean copies

of newsletters, correspondence, ritual material, or other organizational literature. The goal of participant observation is to gain as complete a picture of the group as possible, to see it as well as one can through the eyes of its members.

The participant observation approach, however, is not without its difficulties, including, among others, the insider/outsider problem, the question of trust, and potential for conversion of the researcher.

First, many of those who have undertaken to study modern Paganism are themselves practitioners, most often Wiccans or Witches of one type or another. This is the case, for example, with Nikki Bado-Fralick's work, *Coming to the Edge of the Circle* (2005). While Bado-Fralick handles the issue deftly and with admirable academic integrity, it raises what is known in religious studies as the insider/outsider problem. That is, how objective can researchers be if they are studying their own traditions? Some researchers are unable to step outside their own experience enough to see what's happening around them, while others see their research as a means of legitimating their particular religious tradition. This is not an issue distinctive to modern Paganism, of course, but it does need to be considered carefully when pursuing one's research.

Second, there is the problem of trust, particularly when researchers who are not insiders become involved with a group to the extent that group members forget that they are subjects in a research project. When Tanya Luhrmann conducted her dissertation research among a ritual magic group in the mid-1980s, which was published as *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1989), it is clear that some of her subjects came to accept her more as a member than a visitor. Many, then, were shocked and hurt by her interpretations of their beliefs and practices when her work was published some years later. Indeed, when one of us began researching modern Paganism nearly two decades later, among some the hurt was still palpable. "You're not going to pull a Tanya on us, are you?" Cowan was asked at a conference once (cf. Hutton 2003: 260–265). Losing the trust of one's subjects is nearly always fatal to a research project involving participant observation. The best advice we can offer on this is always to keep one's identity as a researcher clearly established with the group and continually seek the ongoing, informed consent of your subjects.

Finally, there is the problem of "going native," to use the colloquial phrase. That is, researchers can become so involved or enamored with their subjects or the group under study that they lose sight of their primary role as researcher and begin to function more as group members. While it is not common, it has been known to happen. Of course, people have the right to

make their own religious choices and we often discover important things about ourselves during our research – including what may be more compatible, rewarding, or meaningful religious beliefs.

None of these are reasons not to pursue participant observation, but they are cautionary tales that require ongoing recognition that a research project is underway, continuing and informed consent among one's research subjects, and the maintenance of one's sense of oneself as a researcher.

Further Reading on Wicca and Witchcraft

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Chapter 10

Rethinking Cults: The Significance of New Religious Movements

Bearing in mind that we have done little more than scratch the surface in the preceding chapters, what have we learned from this brief survey of different new religious movements? What can we say about their significance, and what do they tell us both about the societies in which they have emerged and about religion in general? To answer these questions, we hope readers will take three principal points away with them. First, despite occasional reports to the contrary, religion as a social and a human phenomenon is alive and well in the early twenty-first century, and any news of its demise is premature at best. While there are certainly areas in which religion plays a considerably less dominant role than it has in the past – various Scandinavian countries, for example – in other regions, especially in the southern hemisphere and in Africa, religion flourishes and new religions continue to emerge and vie for a place at the table.

Second, despite the simplistic way in which new religions are often presented in the media, by dedicated countermovements such as the secular anticult and the evangelical countercult, or by law enforcement and legislative bodies, they cannot be reduced to the controversies that have brought them to public attention. Far more than that is required to understand them. Third, precisely because they are *new* in one way or another, though not all in the same way, new religions afford us ongoing opportunities to learn how religion as a social and a human phenomenon emerges, develops, adapts, flourishes or declines, and, occasionally, disappears. If, as social scientists, we regard the world as our laboratory, then new religions present us with experimental faiths that we can observe, in some cases throughout their entire life cycles.

However much it may have lost pride of place in some societies, religion remains a vital part of the human condition. From the mid-1960s to the late

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1980s, however, many sociologists believed that religion was firmly on the decline in the West. Building on statistical analyses of mainline Protestant demographics, principally in North America and western Europe – which were, in fact, declining, and in some cases precipitously so – many scholars extrapolated that the predictions of thinkers from Voltaire to Marx to Freud had actually come to pass. Humanity was outgrowing its social and personal need for religious faith and was finally leaving religion behind. Where it remained, it did so only as a vestige of a less enlightened past. This was, however, not the reality of the situation. From the emergence of Islamist theocracies in the Middle East and Africa to the boom in charismatic Christianity in Latin America, from the staggering growth of groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses to, in our case, the proliferation of other new religious movements around the world, religion appears to be alive, well, and unlikely to disappear any time soon. Indeed, despite the best efforts of the secular anticult and evangelical countercult movements, despite the legal and social opprobrium with which they are met in many places in the world, and despite the general skepticism with which they are often regarded in the media, new religions continue to appear, whether as avant-garde interpretations of faith and practice that emerge within a particular tradition, or as new and innovative movements that combine and adapt elements from a variety of source traditions, often both religious and secular. Since there is every indication that new religions will continue to emerge and exist, how we understand their meaning in society becomes a matter of some importance. Throughout this final chapter, we invite readers to take particular note of some groups we consider worthy of further study. Some look like new religions, at least as they have been traditionally understood, others do not. This is not an exhaustive list, by any means, but a sampling of the various groups that continue to appear in the new religious world.

TEXT BOX 1 Santa Muerte

Because they often have more devotees than official Roman Catholic saints, folk saints are an important part of religious life across Latin America. In Mexico, localized devotion to Santa Muerte, known as "Saint Death," can be traced to the eighteenth century. Very little historical record of Santa Muerte devotionalism existed, however, until the 1940s, when Mexican and North American anthropologists discovered what was then the largely rural, village-centered worship of the folk saint. During the 1960s migrant workers brought Santa Muerte from rural Mexico to the sprawling urban center of Mexico City, A generation later, in the

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TEXT BOX 1 *cont'd*

1990s,veneration of Santa Muerte exploded in popularity. The first public shrine to "the Bony Lady" was erected in Mexico City's Tepito Barrio in 2001, and two years later the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church, Mex-USA was established as an "official" Santa Muerte church. Devotion to Santa Muerte is so widespread that she now rivals St. Jude, and even the Virgin of Guadalupe, in popularity among ordinary Mexicans. By some estimates, as many as five million Mexicans venerate Santa Muerte. With continued Latino immigration into the United States, shrines, temples, and churches, such as the Templo de Santa Muerte shrine in Los Angeles, now dot the religious landscape in many cities.

A variety of factors shape and influence the recent surge in veneration of the "Skinny Lady" in Mexico: governmental and fiscal crises have led to unemployment, poverty, the erosion of government welfare programs, and an extraordinary inequality of wealth between rich and poor. Adding to this is the wholesale violence and political destabilization created by the growing power of the drug cartels. Indeed, the primary reason that Santa Muerte has become so controversial in recent years is her veneration by drug traffickers, kidnapping gangs, prison inmates, and the most disadvantaged segments of the Mexican population. However, she also commands a considerable following among those on the other side of the drug wars including police, soldiers, and prison guards, as well as among a broad cross-section of Mexican society, particularly younger adults. Most devotees of the "Pretty Girl" view their veneration of the skeleton saint as complementary to their Catholic faith or even a part of it. That is, they do not consider it a replacement for that faith.

While extremely popular among the disadvantaged and marginalized segments of Mexican society, Santa Muerte has met resolute resistance from two major establishment power groups: the Roman Catholic Church and the Mexican government. The Church has taken a decisive stance against Santa Muerte, denouncing the veneration of "Saint Death" as incompatible with Catholicism, as "satanic" and tantamount to worshipping an enemy of Christ. For its part, the Mexican government has been even more aggressive. Santa Muerte tattoos, for example, have become one means of police profiling: those whose ink depicts the "Bony Lady" are immediately suspect. The Interior Secretariat removed the Mexican–US Catholic Apostolic Traditional Church from the list of officially recognized religions. The church's founder, Bishop David Romo Guillen, was sentenced to prison sentence on contested criminal charges. In March 2009, the Mexican army bulldozed dozens of roadside shrines dedicated to the folk saint along the US–Mexico border. Official religious and governmental suppression notwithstanding, Santa Muerte continues to attract strong and growing veneration both in Mexico and the United States, where it has even appeared in such pop culture products as the television series *Dexter*.

Two Perspectives: Cults versus New Religious Movements

While there are historical and sociological nuances within each category, the range of opinion about new religions tends to cluster under two broad rubrics. Either these groups are *cults*, with all the negative stereotyping and social stigma that term has come to connote, or they are *new religions*, legitimate (if not necessarily savory) faith movements at varying stages of emergence and development. We suggest that they are far more usefully and accurately understood as the latter than the former.

The cult stereotype

We can neither define new religions by the controversies that have brought them to public attention nor reduce them to the often singular elements played out in the media. Indeed, for most new religions, if controversies exist, they are rarely noticed by the public at all, since they rarely rise to the media level of newsworthiness. In the history of those relatively few groups that do become known for the controversies they have generated, however, and though these controversies may be among their most dramatic moments, there is always considerably more to each group than that. The consistent failure of the secular anticult and the evangelical countercult movements, of mainstream media, and of agents of the state to recognize this, though, does little more than perpetuate the cult stereotype to the potential detriment of any religious group that offers new or innovative teachings and practices, any new vision of the "unseen order." Though dedicated countermovements may acknowledge the range and diversity of new religions in principle, in practice their strategies of stigmatization and marginalization are only effective if suspect groups can be gathered under a single explanatory rubric. For many members of the evangelical countercult, for example, any new religion – no matter what its parent tradition, no matter what its practices or beliefs – is little more than the latest manifestation of Satan's eternal war on God. No matter how broad the range of belief and practice in the NRM spectrum, because they do not acknowledge the same beliefs as these evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, they are, by definition, in league with the devil.

The secular anticult, on the other hand, has relied on the overarching ideology of "brainwashing" or "thought control," and an ever-increasing collection of "cult characteristics" by which it believes suspect groups may be identified. Often called the "brainwashing theory" or the "brainwashing hypothesis," as though there exists some measure of empirical data that

could be examined in rigorous scientific study, for three decades the notion that unscrupulous religious leaders could bring about sudden, drastic, and permanent personality changes in those they come in contact with has had the force of an ideology within the anticult movement. As a theory of conversion, however, it fails on a number of fronts (see Bromley 2001).

First, there is the *empirical complexity* of the conversion phenomenon. Put differently, no unitary model of conversion, no single, easily demonstrable process can account for why men and women convert to religion, or why they convert to one religion over another. Rather, a multitude of cognitive factors, social pressures, cultural influences, and affective states accompany the conversion experience. While some conversions may appear similar on the surface – those who convert to evangelical Christianity at a Billy Graham crusade, for example, may all recite the same "Sinner's Prayer" – the social, cultural, and personal factors that brought each person to the point of conversion will be different. Because brainwashing ideology depends on a more monolithic understanding of religious conversion, it simply cannot account for the range of choices people make, the reasons they make them, or the agency they exercise during the affiliation process.

TEXT BOX 2 Burning Man Festival

Western history is marked by a variety of carnivalesque, ranging from the Roman-era Saturnalia to the Middle Ages' Feast of Fools, from traveling morality plays leading to the sale of indulgences to the grim spectacle of public beheadings during the Reign of Terror, from Mexico's *Dios de la Muerte* to Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans'. All of these, whether intended for celebration or social control, for entertainment of the masses or education of the subjugated, share liminal moments when, if only for a moment, social conventions are challenged and the worlds in which we live find themselves turned upside down.

By proactively inviting what many of us consider normally taboo behaviors – nudity, public art for art's sake, the intentional creation and destruction of artwork – Burning Man is a recent innovation among the kind of celebrative, creative festivals which temporarily dismantle, radically revise, and occasionally restructure established social groupings and practices. Emerging out of the Suicide Club and Cacophony Society in 1970s–1980s San Francisco, its signature event, the public burning of a humanoid wooden figure, the eponymous "Burning Man,"

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TEXT BOX 2 *cont'd*

began in 1986. Since then, the Burning Man Festival has grown from a few hundred hardy souls into a week-long carnival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert that now attracts tens of thousands of participants.

Each year's festival features a specific theme that offers a kind of symbolic umbrella for the radical creativity that characterizes the week's events. One of the magical qualities of Burning Man Festival is that the Burning Man site is entirely reconstructed annually. There is no permanent location, and at the end of the festival the temporary community is disassembled and great care is taken to return the environment to its pre-festival condition.

"Burners" embark on a pilgrimage-like journey to the community's remote desert location to occupy this liminal space for a few days before departing its ritual space and reassuming their former lives. Most "burners" do not regard the Burning Man Festival as a religious event, and many would be more likely to identify themselves as spiritual rather religious. However, the organizers do envision creating spiritual change in the world through the event and many burners report their experience in spiritual terms, while many of the activities and artistic exhibits embody theistic and spiritual themes.

It is true that in terms of the sheer number of participants Burning Man has yet to rival the Mardi Gras festivals in New Orleans or Rio de Janeiro, but there is a stronger identity with Burning Man and a more radically creative impulse motivating the festival. There is a "burner" identity. One does not simply *go* to Burning Man, one is a part of what Burning Man becomes that year. There also is a growing network of local and regional events that are inspired by the Black Rock Festival. Given their radical challenge to convention, carnivalesque celebrations are difficult to create and sustain. This one, however, is worth watching.

Second, the brainwashing hypothesis is grounded in a belief that the recruitment strategies employed by dangerous religious groups strip potential adherents of their own agency in the conversion process. Through the actions of the "cult," men and women lose the ability to think for themselves, to make rational decisions that are in their own best interest. This presents us with the problem of *observability*. More precisely, how do we know this is what has happened? It may be more comforting

to believe it, but we are not privy either to the recruitment strategies themselves, or to the individuals who may be in the process of recruitment and conversion. Support for the brainwashing ideology rests on what one of us has called "surrogate indicators" (Bromley 2001: 322) – post-exit personal accounts and testimony of family and friends to the radical personality changes that have taken place in their loved ones. Because, in most cases, we cannot observe the recruitment process from beginning to end, there is no responsible way to generalize the effects of one recruitment strategy over another. In many cases, claims of brainwashing serve more to satisfy the stakeholders' anxiety about the conversion of a loved one than to explain the mechanism that facilitated a change in religious commitment.

Third, as we have noted at numerous places throughout this book, new religions display a range of *organizational styles and structures*. Some religious movements are too loosely organized to support the concentrated effort a process such as brainwashing would require. Others groups change too often and too rapidly over their life cycle for a rigorous and exacting process like brainwashing to be deployed effectively. Still others have a number of different membership types, or levels of commitment within the organization. In terms of the overarching anticult ideology, this begs the questions of whether a person can be a little bit brainwashed, and what differentiates a little brainwashing from effective persuasion?

Fourth, there is the *problem of history*. If, as the most ardent supporters of the brainwashing ideology contend, it is such an insidious and effective process that almost everyone is subject and few are able to resist, how does one explain the astonishing lack of success that new religions have had overall? This is not to say that people do not convert. That would be absurd. But most new religious movements have far fewer members than either they claim or the public believes, and their ability to recruit and retain converts is, as a general rule, abysmal. Recall, for example, that none of the groups that initially triggered the brainwashing hysteria in the United States ever had a membership of more than 10,000. This may seem like a lot, but it pales when compared either to the number of mainstream religious adherents, or to the almost magical power claimed for the brainwashing process.

Besides the brainwashing ideology, the secular anticult has generated an encomium of "cult characteristics," some of which we discussed briefly in Chapter 1. Recall that these are used by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA; cf. Lalich and Langone 2006) to identify

potentially dangerous groups, and on the basis of this identification to make recommendations to families, friends, and, where possible, both civil and military authorities. Yet, as we pointed out, these markers are fraught with problems, gnawing questions for which the secular anticult has few answers.

First, the ICSA believes suspect groups have a "polarized us-versus-them mentality, which may cause conflict with the wider society." What does this say, however, about religious groups that have an explicit "us-versus-them mentality," but which represent the dominant tradition in a particular society? In the United States, for example, evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism accounts for at least a third of the population, and maintains a rigorous distinction between the saved and the damned, between those who have "accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior" and those who have not. It is difficult to imagine a more deeply entrenched "us-versus-them mentality." Indeed, Dave Hunt (1926–2013), a popular evangelical countercult author and speaker wrote, that "the only reason for becoming familiar with other religions and other religious writings would be in order to show those who follow these false systems wherein the error lies and thereby to rescue them" (1996: 68). If believing that one's view of the world is correct over all others contributes to the formation of a cultic group, then far more religious and political groups in history fall into this category than not.

Second, according to the ICSA, dangerous religious groups use "mind-altering practices (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, and debilitating work routines) to excess." Here, though, there is no indication what they mean by "excess." What one person regards as an unreasonable amount of chanting or an inordinate period of meditation, another may feel only barely makes an impression on their spiritual sensibilities. Around the world, Roman Catholics pray the rosary daily, many for hours. As part of their daily practice, Buddhists from many different traditions chant sutras for lengthy periods of time. That the secular anticult deploys such a subjective quantification – and that they would include practices such as chanting and glossolalia in a list with "denunciation sessions" and "debilitating work routines" – betrays a profound lack of understanding on their part of the history and practice of devotional and ecstatic religious experience. Once again, many of these practices are fundamental to a number of dominant religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, few of which the secular anticult would include in its list of dangerous groups.

Third, the ICSA is concerned that cultic groups are "preoccupied with making money" and "with bringing in new members." In terms of new membership, many religious groups openly proselytize, and celebrate conversions whenever and wherever they occur. If recruitment is a hallmark of cultic activity, then in religiously plural societies relatively few groups escape condemnation according to the ICSA's criterion. To return to Christianity, the dominant tradition in the West, two of the principal goals of the multi-billion-dollar-a-year Protestant televangelism industry are to persuade non-Christians to convert to evangelicalism, and to encourage consumers of televangelism to contribute financially. The personal and financial scandals associated with televangelical ministries are well known, yet, though they clearly fulfill these characteristics of the ICSA's list, few are accused of being dangerous cultic groups.

Fourth, the ICSA considers a group potentially dangerous when active "members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities." Yet and again, this marker founders on its extreme subjectivity, its ambiguity, and its inability to distinguish between groups in which this may be a potential problem and groups for which high levels of commitment characterize membership by definition. What constitutes an "inordinate amount of time" for one person would be considered barely sufficient by another. Moreover, for thousands of years and in many places around the world, men and women have made life-long commitments to their own religious path, whether in community or living as solitary contemplatives. Monastic communities from a number of different religious traditions demand complete commitment on the part of their members, many of whom have renounced all other aspects of their lives in their search for the divine. Members of the secular anticult, however, rarely (if ever) consider Carmelite nuns or Zen Buddhist monks the victims of dangerous cults by virtue of their wholehearted dedication to their spiritual path.

Thus, given that (i) there is no empirical evidence to support the "brainwashing" or "thought control" hypothesis on which much of the secular anticult ideology is based, and (ii) that each of their other "cult group" characteristics falters or fails on both conceptual and empirical grounds, we must find a more useful way to discuss these groups. If we do not, then we risk perpetuating the "cult stereotype" and contributing to the general popular ignorance about new religious movements. We suggest that they are best understood as precisely that, *new religious movements*, and, warts and all, it is in this that their principal significance lies.

TEXT BOX 3 Trucker Churches and Cowboy Churches

Trucker and Cowboy Churches are both examples of rapidly growing niche churches that have been flying under the church-watchers' radar while spreading rapidly in the United States and elsewhere. These churches are worth watching because they are one response to the fact that church attendance in Western societies has long been predominantly female. Evangelical churches, in particular, have responded by pursuing "unchurched Harrys," elusive male parishioners who are not receptive to conventional churches. Though not limited to them, "truckers" and "cowboys" exemplify these church-resistant male cultures. "Bikers" is another obvious example. Like the much larger megachurch movement, Trucker and Cowboy churches emerged to entice the unchurched by repackaging the traditional church service format, while steadfastly holding to conservative Christian doctrine. Although, at the end of the day, both are niche churches that will not substantially close the gender gap in traditional church attendance, they reflect the continuing evangelical mission to proselytize marginal populations.

Trucker Churches

During the 1950s, the construction of the interstate highway system in the United States led to a dramatic shift in commercial goods transportation from railway to highway. More than three million men (and women) pilot big rigs across the North American continent. While the popular culture image of truckers has fluctuated from hero to renegade, the actual circumstance of truckers is anything but an adventurous life on the open road. On a daily basis, truckers face difficult work conditions, minimum wage incomes, long hours, serious physical risks, loneliness, and exhaustion. Since long-distance truckers may be on the road for days and weeks at a time, truck stops emerged as gathering places providing services to truckers that range from rest, food, and fuel to sexual services and drugs.

Trucker churches also sprang up to offer religious services to men who were on the road, separated from family, friendship, and other traditional social networks. One of the first Trucker Churches, Transport for Christ, was founded in 1951, by a former long-haul trucker. Since drivers are constantly on the move, services typically

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TEXT BOX 3 *cont'd*

are held for only a handful of truckers at a time. The format is non-denominational, but traditional, conservative Christian. The emblematic Trucker Church chapel is the converted trailer of a big rig, furnished simply with homemade pews, a pulpit, and religious images hung on the trailer walls.

Cowboy Churches

The legendary American cowboy actually thrived for only a few decades in the second half of the nineteenth century before open-range cattle ranches were supplanted by fenced pastures and cattle drives replaced by rail transport of livestock. While actual cowboys are now in short supply, there is a robust population of ranchers, rodeo competitors, and horse enthusiasts who identify with the values of masculinity, individualism, and independence popularly associated with cowboy life. Cowboy culture continues to live on in the American imagination through western attire, music and dancing, dude ranches, and rodeos. Rodeo life in particular dramatizes the kind of physical skill and endurance that actual cowboy life required and also permits a continuation of the predominantly male culture on the margins of conventional society.

Like Trucker churches, Cowboy churches appeal to this particular lifestyle and its values. Appearing first in the 1970s, the number of Cowboy churches now approaches 900. Like Trucker churches, Cowboy churches promote traditional, conservative Christian theology, but within the cowboy's cultural format. Common settings for cowboy congregations include rodeos, ranches, farmhouses, warehouses, and campgrounds. Contemporary and classic country, western, and bluegrass music are given Christian lyrics and themes. Work dress is common, animals are welcome in the sanctuary, and baptisms are performed in horse troughs and lakes. Cowboy churches reconnect past and present for congregants by drawing parallels with biblical characters who lived simple, self-sufficient nomadic or agricultural lives. The cowboy mystique is sacralized. As one cowboy church post commented, "The ministry encapsulates character, honesty, respect, integrity, strength, and truth; in other words – CHRIST, all characteristics that describe a cowboy." Indeed, some cowboy culture art depicts Jesus as a cowboy.

NRMs as new religions

Despite the certainty displayed by their adherents, the origins of many of the world's religions are shrouded in mystery. At some point in time, though, most religions that we know of were new religions, either because they imported wholly new doctrines and practices into geographic regions controlled by another tradition, or because they introduced sometimes startling innovations into traditions of which they were already a part, changing them in significant and substantial ways. The nature of these origins, however, and their effects on the development of the tradition are often hotly contested. Did Jesus really say or do the things attributed to him in the gospel of John, for example, or, as numerous scholars contend, do those texts represent later interpretations imposed on nascent Christian communities by the leaders of the early church? Did Jesus really understand himself to be the Messiah, the Lord and Savior that has been proclaimed by Christians for centuries? Did he intend something entirely different? Or, did he say it at all? What does it mean for Christianity if one or another is the case? Since a good measure of Christian theology is predicated on the interpretation of sacred texts, inferences and conjecture drawn from past doctrine and practice, and the denominational and devotional proclivities of particular theologians, the answers to many of these questions remain issues of faith, not necessarily matters of fact.

We are not privy, for example, to the extent of the debates within the early Jesus movement that led to the Council of Jerusalem, and the decision that the Apostle Paul could preach to Gentiles, and that Gentiles could become part of the Christian community provided they agreed, among other things, not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. We have only the record in the Book of Acts (ch. 15) to tell us what happened – hardly a disinterested source and of questionable historical reliability. What we can infer, however, both from this record and from what we know of Palestinian Judaism at the time, is that the innovation suggested by Paul – that the message of the Jesus movement should not be reserved solely for the Jews – was enough of a departure from the dominant practice that it generated considerable debate and controversy. Whenever and however it was decided that Gentiles were not necessarily exempt from the message of Jesus and could be welcomed into the fellowship of the Christ, Christianity became, in effect, a new religious movement. No longer was it simply a small messianic sect within the larger context of Second Temple Judaism, but a theological, doctrinal, and practical innovation that stepped

out on its own. Similar examples of innovation, controversy, and change could be gathered from throughout Christian history – the ecumenical councils that gradually narrowed and focused the parameters of belief until only those who conformed to the Athanasian Creed were considered part of the Christian community; the great *filioque* split between the Eastern and Western churches in the eleventh century; Martin Luther's challenge to the validity of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice five centuries later; the Calvinist doctrines of election and predestination; or Baptist belief in the priesthood of all believers. Indeed, as one of us has written,

> the history of the Christian Church is arguably the history of the different ways in which devout men and women have understood the nature of their relationship with God, how they have argued about the relative merits of these different understandings, and how they have resolved – or failed to resolve – the tensions inherent in the disputes. (Cowan 2003b: 6)

Buddhism in India six centuries before the common era, the Jesus movement in first-century Palestine, the development of Shi'a Islam in mid-sixth-century Arabia, and the rather sudden appearance of Mormonism in nineteenth-century America – all challenged the dominance of particular traditions and all were stigmatized as deviant and dangerous. In many ways, the new religions we encounter today are little different, and the countervailing forces they experience differ little from those that challenged the legitimacy of other emergent religions. As new expressions of the religious quest appear as we watch, we are able to observe in something like its native form the manifestation of religion as a human and a social phenomenon. That is, rather than have to extrapolate the processes of religious emergence and development from the often scant and unreliable historical resources available to us, resources that are not infrequently manipulated to support very particular readings of the data (see, for example, Ehrman 1993, 2003, 2005, 2014), new religious movements allow us to chart growth, development, decline, and occasionally disappearance as these processes are occurring, as well as investigate the reactions of the dominant culture in which these movements emerge.

Many, though by no means all, religious movements begin with some form of charismatic leader, someone who offers a different way of interpreting the teachings of a particular tradition, who challenges the

efficacy of dominant faith practices, and/or who proclaims a new revelation or doctrine of salvation. With new religious movements, we have the potential to observe how this charismatic authority develops within the leadership and how it is granted to leaders by the membership – and, in some cases, how it withheld or withdrawn. Moreover, when the leadership changes, whether through the death of a charismatic founder or the passing of a prophetic mantle to the next generation, new religions offer a window on the ways in which faith communities maintain integrity in the face of significant organizational change or external pressure. Some, like the Church of Scientology, consolidate power in the hands of a relative few and establish strict bureaucracies to ensure the purity of the foundational teachings. Others, like many streams within modern Paganism, take a more laissez-faire approach to organizational structure and leadership, essentially according to everyone the right to follow their own path as they see fit, or to develop alternative paths if they feel so led.

Since, at its foundation, religion is a social phenomenon, membership is a crucial aspect of group life. Whether we are discussing well-established faiths or newly emergent groups, most religious movements face a similar set of problems: how to keep those members they have – an important aspect of which includes socialization of the next generation – and how to bring new members into the fold. Although, obviously, these issues are not limited to new religions, groups such as we have discussed in this book offer concentrated environments in which to study the processes of recruitment, affiliation, retention, and disaffiliation. How does the group conceptualize "membership"? How does that conceptualization change over time, and why? How do certain conceptualizations of membership function in the public presentation of the group, and in its inner working? If these differ, how so and why? Recall, for example, that those who attend Ramtha's School of Enlightenment are not considered "members" or "followers," but instead prefer to be called "students." While the vast majority of TM practitioners have little or nothing to do with the official Transcendental Meditation organization, most full members of The Family International have committed themselves to the movement wholeheartedly enough to live in one of the group's many communal homes. The Church of Scientology regularly claims between eight and ten million members worldwide, yet there is little evidence that more than a tiny fraction of these are involved on a day-to-day basis. What does it mean in this case to say that one is a "member" of the group?

TEXT BOX 4 Sunday Assembly

The Sunday Assembly is an atheist church, which may seem a bit of a contradiction in terms. It is a sanctuary and a meeting place for those who are either certain there is no god, or uncertain if there is. Certainly, the Sunday Assembly is not the first atheist church in the West. In the late nineteenth century, for example, "ethical unions" and August Comte's "Religion of Humanity" emerged and some of these groups are still in existence. Nonetheless, in the wake of the so-called "New Atheist" movement, popularized by such writers as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, Sunday Assembly has attracted both extensive media coverage and a rapidly growing membership. Atheists, agnostics, skeptics, freethinkers, and non-believers of all kinds suddenly found that it was safe to come out of the closet, as it were.

The founders of Sunday Assembly, British comedians and entertainers Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, were both raised in established faith traditions but, like so many of their peers, as adults they became alienated both from the churches of their youth and from their ideals and beliefs. Recognizing the need for social support among non-believers, however, the basic human urge toward community, they formed Sunday Assembly in 2013. The group attracted over 200 visitors to its first service, and the congregation quickly grew to 600. Offshoot groups, which operate independently, quickly formed in other areas of the UK, as well as the US, Canada, and Australia. The group's active Internet presence has been a significant factor in its rapid growth. While Sunday Assembly disavows both a deity and a doctrine, it dismisses traditional atheism as "boring." The Assembly teaches, essentially, that this current life is all that is available to sentient beings and, because of that, negativity and hopelessness should be replaced by values, dreams, and behaviors that always and in every place elevate the human experience. The church's motto is simply "Live better, help often, wonder more." Each monthly service features a specific theme, a live band, a guest lecture, and a time for reflection.

While the Sunday Assembly may be growing, it also has an abundant supply of detractors. Both Christian and atheist opponents have criticized Sunday Assembly for too closely resembling a conventional Christian church. The founders, Jones and Evans, respond that what they ultimately envision is a "secular temple" that will offer community to participants in the way that contemporary churches do, but without the supernatural trappings or dogmatic cosmologies associated with traditional religion. Whether or not the concept of an atheist church is viable remains to be seen, as the current congregations are almost exclusively white, young, and middle class. Still, the number of both religiously non-affiliated individuals, as well as self-confessed agnostics and atheists, continues to grow in the West, creating a potential niche for this novel addition to the (non)religion landscape.

Although they are obviously subject to interpretation and debate, for many established religious traditions the basic canons of sacred knowledge – whether passed on through written texts or oral teachings – are fairly fixed. New religions, on the other hand, frequently present us with the opportunity to observe the processes of scriptural formation, legitimation, and defense while they occur. As we have noted, for example, in the Church of Scientology the writings of L. Ron Hubbard are considered sacred scripture, and cannot be modified or manipulated in any way. Since Hubbard died in 1986, however, and the Church continues to publish a wide range of material "based on" his writings (e.g., Church of Scientology International 1998, 1999, 2002), this raises the issue of who is in control of the ongoing publication process, and on what bases they make their decisions. Following the death of David Berg, on the other hand, The Family International has democratized its process of revelation and interpretation considerably. Though Maria and Peter remain the acknowledged leaders of the movement, prophetic revelation and interpretation are delegated throughout the group and no one person has absolute control over the revelational product (Shepherd and Shepherd 2006). Indeed, it seems now that the "lit" which was so important in the group's formative is years is diminishing in importance as The Family moves toward more mainstream Christian doctrines and practices. It is difficult to overstate the scholarly importance of the opportunity to observe this as it happens.

Finally, new religions provide an important lens on the dominant social order within which these groups emerge. How a particular society treats minority faiths says much about the history, structure, and values of that society. While a few new religions may appear within societies with strict controls on religious beliefs, such groups always operate at the very margins of those societies. A proliferation of new religious movements, on the other hand, such as we have seen in the United States, Canada, and western Europe, requires a certain degree of tolerance for religious plurality and, indeed, a cultural willingness to abide a measure of religious ambiguity and competition. Even in these societies, however, the playing field is hardly level for all religions, and religious tolerance is not absolute. Why, for example, has the Church of Scientology been able to regain official recognition as a religion within the United States, but has never secured it in Canada? Why has it been regarded as a "dangerous sect" in both France and Germany? Why is it banned in Greece? These are questions that address the societies in question at least as much as they do the Church of Scientology itself.

New Religions as Experimental Faiths

Social scientists and religious studies scholars have long recognized that nothing is sacred in and of itself, and that no conceptualization of the sacred order is either universally or self-evidently true. James's "unseen order," which many would call the sacred, manifests itself instead as a function of social agreement, of consensus among a certain group. As Cowan has written elsewhere,

> whatever technologies are used to facilitate their emergence and evolution, as social and cultural products, religious beliefs, practices, and traditions exhibit their durability because of the agreement between participants that those things in which they participate are sacred as opposed to profane, meaningful as opposed to trivial, and efficacious as opposed to impotent. (Cowan 2005: 27–8)

Whether they understand the origins of humanity as a product of intergalactic population control (Church of Scientology) or a program of extraterrestrial genetic manipulation (International Raëlian Movement) that occurred millions of years ago; whether their soteriology rests on novel or alternative messianic principles (Unification Church; Branch Davidians) or an optimistic belief in divine immanence (modern Paganism); and whether they understand their highest good in life as participating in the manipulation of "natural laws" through meditation (TM) or Consciousness and Energy processes (Ramtha's School of Enlightenment), new religions are, in many ways, *experimental faiths* that both posit their own visions of the "unseen order" and establish their own means by which we should "harmoniously adjust ourselves thereto" (James [1902] 1994: 61). As we have seen in each case, these conceptions of the unseen order and the resources by which men and women negotiate their place within that order are intimately related.

Like their analogs in the natural and physical sciences, sometimes these new religious experiments succeed, and we witness what some scholars are willing to call the emergence of new world faiths (see, for example, Stark [1984] on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an emerging world religion). Other times, movements fail early in their existence and we learn of them peripherally, if at all. Still other times, however, experiments in religious innovation generate dire consequences, both for those involved, and, occasionally, for innocent bystanders. The most recent and devastating example of this was Aum Shinrikyo's 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system.

This brings us to an important observation. Once again following the analogy of physical and natural science, simply because something is experimental does not mean that the experiment itself is either noble or wise. Neither is labeling the experiment religious any assurance of nobility or wisdom. Some groups, such as Aum, have done horrific things in the pursuit of their particular vision of the unseen order. Historically, however, while events such as these are relatively rare across the spectrum of new religious movements (see Bromley and Melton 2002), experimental faiths also generate conflict in other, less obvious ways. Problems can arise (i) when a new religion's revisioning of the world conflicts with or deviates significantly from the prevalent cultural understanding of the unseen order; and (ii) when what a new religion regards as necessary for "harmoniously adjusting" to that unseen order differs substantially from that demanded by the dominant culture. Examples of this basic principle could easily be gathered from throughout religious history.

TEXT BOX 5 Entheogenic Churches

Drugs have played an integral part in religious, spiritual, and shamanic rituals throughout history and across cultures. When used for religious purposes, these substances are known as "entheogens." In a number of entheogenic churches and religious groups, psychoactive substances such as LSD, mescaline (peyote), psilocybin ("magic mushrooms"), cannabis, toad venom, and, most recently, "designer psychedelics," are regarded as sacraments.

In North America, legal use of entheogens for religious purposes is extremely rare and the groups who use them are almost always small and short-lived. Native American peyote rituals, however, are the exception. Organized peyote use among Indian peoples can be traced to the 1880s, following the consignment of Plains Indians to reservations in Oklahoma, when Comanche Chief Quanah Parker and Caddo Indian John Wilson were instrumental in the spread of sacramental peyote use. In 1918, the Native American Church (later the Native American Church of North America) was established, though mainly to deflect the attempted criminalization of ritual peyote use. Peyote use spread rapidly among Indian tribes, and currently as many as one-quarter of Indians may be affiliated with the Native American Church of North America. Laws prohibiting peyote use cannot be

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enforced on reservations and law enforcement agencies have typically not attempted to prevent peyote use in Indian rituals. However, in 1990 the US Supreme Court case *Employment Division v. Smith* (494 U.S. 872) held that there was no right to free exercise of religion involving use of peyote when that use transcended other laws. Stringent legal proscriptions, however, has not stopped either the ongoing religious use of these substances or challenges to their prohibition. Two contemporary groups are particularly interesting in this regard and worthy of further attention: Peyote Way Church of God, and União do Vegetal.

Peyote Way Church of God was founded in 1977 by Immanuel Trujillo, a onetime member of the Native American Church. Although the church is open to both Indians and non-Indians, it has fewer than 200 members, and peyote is used as a sacrament in church rituals. Among other things, Peyote Way Church of God questioned why the Native American Church discriminated against non-Indians, and why churches other than the Native American Church were prohibited from using peyote in their own religious rituals. During the 1980s, representatives of Peyote Way approached state and federal officials, including several US presidents, appealing for reform of peyote laws – requests that were uniformly unsuccessful. The group also initiated several federal lawsuits, arguing that drug laws contravened their constitutional right to religious expression. These, too, were unsuccessful. Despite these setbacks, however, church members continue to use peyote during "spirit walks." The church's small size and remote geographical location, its limitation of peyote use to sacramental purposes, and a cooperative relationship with local law enforcement have thus far allowed Peyote Way Church of God to maintain its tenuous position.

União do Vegetal (UDV), on the other hand, has recently achieved significant success in challenging laws restricting psychoactive drug use, in this case *ayahuasca*. Ayahuasca, also called "hoasca" or "vegetal," is a hallucinogenic tea brewed from mariri and chacrona leaves found in the Amazon River basin. UDV history begins with Jose Gabriel da Costa, known to his followers as Mestre Gabriel. Born in 1922 in Coracao de Maria, Brazil, in 1961 Gabriel founded União do Vegetal (literally the "union of the plants") and began

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disseminating his teachings, a blend of Christian and Indigenous beliefs. In 1993, UDV was incorporated in Santa Fe, New Mexico. UDV teaches that "drinking the Vegetal creates an enhanced state of consciousness capable of amplifying the perception of our own essentially spiritual nature." The group has 100–200 members in the United States.

Legal disputes began in 1999, when Customs Bureau and Drug Enforcement Administration agents confiscated 30 gallons of hoasca tea because the leaves used to brew it contain a controlled substance, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), which is also known as the "spirit drug." UDV filed suit against the US Department of Justice, arguing that the tea was a "central sacrament" in the church and that the government was infringing its First Amendment rights. The case (*Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal et al.*) went to the Supreme Court, which ruled in 2006 that UDV had "free exercise of its activities in the U.S.A." Chief Justice Roberts cited the government's exemption for the Native American Church as a deciding factor in his decision. Three years later, a US District Judge in Oregon ruled in favor of Santo Daime, another group that uses ayahuasca sacramentally, stating that the DEA was explicitly prohibited from "penalizing the sacramental use of Daime tea."

The continuing challenges to historical restrictions on sacramental drug use raise intriguing questions for scholars of new religions. While it may seem odd to consider illegal substances in the context of religious belief and practice, it is worth remembering that at several points throughout Christian history similar questions have been raised about the sacramental use of wine in Eucharistic rituals. Peyote Way has not succeeded in expanding legal protections for sacramental peyote use but remains active; UDV and Santo Daime have been somewhat more successful in pursuing the right to use ayahuasca sacramentally. At present there are also a number of groups that use cannabis sacramentally, most notably Rastafaria and Santa Muerte. The laws governing cannabis consumption for medical and recreation purposes are changing rapidly. This could create the most likely scenario for legal use of psychoactive substances in religious rituals as new or existing churches openly use cannabis as a religious sacrament.

Whether its vision is political, economic, scientific, artistic, or religious, when a person or group presents a radically reorganized understanding of the world, and, in the case of new religions, of the unseen order to which the world relates, this raises the potential for conflict with those committed to the dominant vision in any given society. In many cases, not only does the new vision offer an alternative way of thinking, it also either implies or contends that the dominant understanding has to that point been incorrect, that believers have been committed to an outdated or erroneous worldview. Once again, history is suffused with examples from a wide range of human endeavors. In terms of new religions, though, by proclaiming that Sun Myung Moon is the Lord of the Second Advent, sent to complete the work of Jesus Christ, Unificationists not only add their own particular understanding to the Christian theological mix, but call into question the validity of every other interpretation of the gospel message. By maintaining that in the practice of auditing they have a uniquely efficacious spiritual process, one that was hidden from humanity until L. Ron Hubbard discovered it, Scientologists implicitly invalidate all other spiritual and therapeutic paths. Broadly speaking, it is in the nature of religion to make exclusive truth claims and a certain range of these competing claims is often tolerated in religiously plural societies. New understandings of truth, however, often challenge dominant thinking in significant ways, and the behavioral demands those new understandings place on adherents not infrequently raises tension with the surrounding community. It is important to note here that these conflicts are not necessarily a problem with the new understanding or the novel behavior, per se, but are functions of the antagonistic relationship that often exists between entrenched worldviews and those that, either implicitly or explicitly, challenge their validity. Conflict, that is, is a co-constructed social behavior.

All this leaves those of us trying to understand new religious movements in a considerably more complex situation than the movements themselves, which regard themselves as the repository of ultimate goodness and truth, or their determined opponents, who believe that they have discovered in new religions an imminent threat to civilized life as we know it. Throughout this book, we have tried to demonstrate that whether a group is accepted as a legitimate religion or not is the product of complex social, cultural, and often political processes, rather than simply the empirical, objective comparison of NRM characteristics with a list of basic traits inherent in all religions. For decades, for example, "real" religions were those that made reference to supernatural entities, most specifically deities that suspiciously resembled

the Christian God. Obviously, this excluded a number of vibrant and vital religious traditions worldwide that few would refuse to consider now.

Moreover, there is an important difference between being recognized by governments as a legitimate religion – whatever social benefits may accrue from that – and functioning as a religion, either sociologically or historically, regardless of state support or sanction. To draw on an historical comparison, though the Roman Catholic Church effectively banned other religious practices during various periods of the Middle Ages, neither Judaism, Islam, nor the various Christian "heresies," for example, ceased to be religious movements in any realistic way. Similarly, while Scientology may lack official status in a number of countries, that does little either to change the self-perception of Scientologists as religious practitioners or to stop the larger organizational struggle for such recognition. We argue that it simply raises the larger question of who decides what is, or is not, a religion, and on what grounds.

In describing new religions as experiments, it is equally important not to fall prey to the fallacy of limited alternatives – the belief that if an organization is one thing, then it cannot be another, and it certainly cannot be both at the same time. It has frequently been argued that Unificationism is less a religious organization than a vast corporate empire directed by Sun Myung Moon in his quest for greater and greater political influence. By this logic it follows that if Unificationism is a multinational corporate empire, then it cannot also be a legitimate religion. Not only is this neither reasonable nor realistic historically – the Roman Catholic Church was the world's most extensive multinational corporate empire for more than a millennium, and arguably remains so today – this argument ignores the lived religious reality of practitioners who are not part of the power structure of the Church, but who derive significant spiritual benefits from their beliefs and practices. Put another way, explaining (or explaining away) the origins of a religious tradition – even if such origins are found to be *entirely* fabricated or fraudulent – does nothing to diminish the cultural force those traditions carry for participants today.

Finally, it is easy to condemn the legitimacy or acceptability of new religious experiments on the basis of what we referred to in the introduction as the "good, moral, and decent fallacy" – the assertion that an "authentic" religion is one that reflects and encourages the behavioral norms of a particular society. However, closer inspection of such claims typically reveals that what is being compared are the rhetorical claims to moral virtue by established traditions with the actual practices of controversial new religions. A comparison of the lived realities of both new and

established traditions yields a considerably less polarized view. There is no more apt example of this than the charges of sexual abuse levied against new religions. An enormous body of research now demonstrates beyond doubt that sexual abuse occurs in families across religious traditions and that sexual abuse by clergy or other religious leaders is not limited to the Catholic tradition, but to a broad range of Protestant traditions as well.

Ultimately, we argue that it is most useful to understand the controversial groups popularly labeled "cults" as *both* new religions *and* as experimental social movements. This is neither an endorsement nor a condemnation of particular groups or their agendas, nor an implicit validation of their beliefs, doctrines, or practices. It is simply an assertion that after more than four decades of work, we possess the social scientific tools to investigate new religions in more useful ways, to understand them as integral components of the societies in which they emerge, and, having understood them thus, to appreciate their contribution to the ongoing search for the unseen order and humanity's quest to harmoniously adjust itself thereto.

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